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黒の魔王

XVIII

赤

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**FREEDOM
NOVEL**

Kuro no Maou

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Chapter 347

The heading at the top of the Spada newspaper issue dated the 27th of the Month of Platinum (Hakkin) reads in large letters:

『His Majesty, King Leonhart departs to rescue Third Princess Charlotte!』

It is a sensational heading, but this information was known in the city of Spada long before it was printed in this newspaper.

In the early hours of the 27th, a great number of citizens witnessed the impressive sight of a combination of the first and second battalions of Spada's army, 『Braveheart』 and 『Tempest』, passing along the main street and leaving for the frontlines through the main gate.

And immediately following that, the Adventurers' Guild issued an emergency quest titled 『Reinforcement of Iskia Village and Iskia Fortress』, so the situation became clear.

A powerful Rank 5 monster had appeared with a large monster army under its command. Iskia Village had been attacked.

However, the most unfortunate thing of all was that the students of the Royal Spada Academy had been conducting the customary open-field exercise in the Iskia Hills where the monsters had appeared.

The Third Princess Charlotte mentioned in the headline was only one of the prominent names involved. The First Prince of the neighboring country of Avalon, Nero Julius Elroad, Kai Est Galbraith and Safiel Maya Hydra of the Four Great Noble Houses of Spada as well as many sons and daughters of other, lesser-known noble families were also participating in this open-field exercise.

Everyone thought that the king leading the army out himself was the natural course of action to take. The people of Spada prayed for their safety.

And then the good news, which all of Spada had been anxiously waiting for, arrived on the 3rd of the Month of Blue Moon (Sougetsu).

『The Nightmare Berserker saves the academy students in Iskia!』

However, reading that heading on the Spada newspaper dated the 3rd caused question marks to appear over the heads of many of Spada's citizens.

And then there was the heading on the next page.

『A Fairy and witch bishoujo combo saves Iskia Village!』

This only served to add more question marks.

If one read the article, they would learn that the academy students including the princess were safe, that Iskia Village had been saved and that this『Nightmare Berserker』and『Fairy and witch bishoujo combo』are adventurers who played a very large role in the emergency quest being completed successfully.

Their detailed backgrounds were completely unknown, but even so, every citizen in Spada understood that a new hero among the adventurers had been born.

「Kyaaaah! Kurono-ku~un!」

High-pitched calls and deafeningly loud cheering echo out in front of Spada's main gates.

The day after the article declaring that the emergency quest has been cleared was published, on the 4th of the Month of Blue Moon (Sougetsu), the students, the knights that were dispatched and the rumored trio of the berserker, Fairy and witch finally make a triumphant return to Spada.

A crowd of ten thousand people has gathered to catch a glimpse of these new heroes. It is just like the victory parades that happen after the Spada army successfully repels one Daidalos's invasion attempts.

Among the surging waves of people, there is a single woman wearing the uniform of Spada's Adventurer Guild.

「Kurono-ku~un! Where are yooooou?!」

There are only two people in Spada who add “kun” to the end of Kurono's name. One of them is, of course, the beautiful, famous, elite receptionist Erina.

In front of her is a large man who appears to be deliberately blocking her view.

She is even using the precious time of the lunch break given to her by the Guild to be here. Erina glares at the back of the man's bald head reproachfully.

The Knights' Order who is leading everyone else has already passed through Spada's prided, sturdy main gates and is proceeding along the main road, where people are lined up on both sides.

They were one step too slow in this incident, but they did make short work of the army of monsters in the areas around Iskia Village.

The cheers for the knights contain honest feelings of praise and respect. Many of the knights smile and wave their hands at the citizens cheering for them.

「Oh, look! The academy students are coming home!」

Behind the Knights' Order, a row of academy students emerges through the main gate, and the cheering grows louder.

「K-Kurono-kun, where are –」

「FAAHAHAHA! I have made a miraculous return from the land of Iskia! My dear citizens of Spada, make sure you remember this legendary homecoming –」

「NOOO! I don't care about the Delusional Prince!」

As the huge man in front of her shifts position suddenly, there is a gap that Erina can finally see through. She sees the prince standing on the roof of the Dragon carriage, laughing loudly.

It is not a luxurious parade carriage for royal use, but simply a Dragon carriage owned by the academy, used for long-distance travel. Of course, there are no handrails on its roof. It should not need to be said that one should not stand on it while it is moving, or even climb onto it in the first place.

Seeing the Second Prince Wilhart standing on the roof in a brazen, imposing stance as if he wants to stand out no matter what, Erina shouts these disrespectful words without thinking.

The reason she is not being dragged away by Law Guardians right now is likely because many of the other citizens gathered here are having similar thoughts.

He is regarded in such a way that his name didn't even appear in the newspaper headline,『His Majesty, King Leonhart departs to rescue Third

Princess Charlotte!』In such a way that people forget that the King has a second child, a son.

「OH! They're here, it's Wing Road!」

「KYAAH! Nero-sama, face this way!」

「I saw it! Just now, Nero-sama looked my way!」

As if completely forgetting the disappointing display of the Second Prince, the crowd stirs and female voices in particular suddenly grow louder.

First Prince Nero Julius Elroad is riding his Unicorn down the main road with his usual sullen expression.

Seeing the embodiment of a prince on a white horse, his fans let out incredibly loud cheers. Even the women who had no interest in him up until now have their eyes drawn to him as they see him in person for the first time, and in the next moment, their hearts might –

「Hmph, foolish little fan girls.」

Women who already have a special someone in their hearts aren't swayed in the slightest, however.

「Oi! Princess Nell isn't there!」

「What, is she inside that carriage?」

In contrast to the women, the men's voices are full of discontent and doubt.

Nell Julius Elroad left Spada to rescue her older brother and her party members who were facing a crisis, and exterminated the monsters surrounding the fortress in a magnificent way. This information was printed in the newspaper.

The beautiful figure of the white-winged princess who should be praised as another hero is nowhere to be seen.

Behind Nero mounted on his Unicorn are his party members, Kai Est Galbraith and Safiel Maya Hydra.

And behind them is a single carriage; the people can guess that Princess Nell is inside it.

Its windows are covered by thick curtains, making it completely impossible to see inside.

If she were merely using the carriage as a method of transport, she could at least smile and wave through the window. The Third Princess who belongs to the royal family should understand that this kind of performance for the people is necessary in these kinds of events.

However, the fact that she isn't doing so indicates that there are some unusual circumstances. With the window covered, the citizens of Spada have no way of knowing what those are. The men who have gathered here simply express their disappointment at the fact that they cannot see the beautiful princess.

And then the group of academy students passes.

「Oi, where is that Nightmare something guy?」

「It's the Nightmare Berserker! Call him by his proper class name!」

「I came to see the bishoujo combo.」

「Are the Fairy and witch not here yet?」

Is the rumored trio trying to make a grand entrance? Just as the large crowd begins to suspect that this might be the case –

「Oi, look! That's the –」

The first ones to see, of course, are the ones gathered right next to the main gate. The rumored adventurers have finally appeared – or seem to have; this is all that the crowd further along can tell.

The reason they are unsure is because no cheer suitable for welcoming the return of heroes is coming from the crowd. Not even simple thoughts like, “they look strong” or “they look cool” can be heard.

In other words, the ones who could see them have gone silent.

「Eh, wait, what is this cold response...」

Erina raises her voice in confusion at this unexpected phenomenon. Just what kind of entrance would be able to make this excited crowd fall silent?

As she wonders, the man in front of her moves again, allowing her to see.

In that spot, Erina sees –

OOOOAAAAAAAAAAAH!

The creature letting out a powerful, terrifying cry is a single large, black horse – no, this is a true Nightmare.

Its mane is flickering with an ominous black-red aura, as if it is alight with the flames of hell.

Its pitch-black body doesn't look alive in the slightest, but as it slowly walks forward, everyone can see the power and inexhaustible stamina that it possesses.

And the one riding this black Nightmare is –

「Kurono-kun...」

This man is Kurono. Even though nobody can hear Erina whisper his name, everyone knows this.

The appearance of the man straddling the terrifying Undead horse is also terrifying.

He has black hair, a black eye and even the clothes he is wearing are all black. He gives the crowd the impression that he is infinitely dark, as if he is wrapped in darkness itself.

The only thing about him that isn't black is his blood-red left eye and the bare right arm, where his sleeve has been destroyed.

The glint in the unusual black-and-red odd-colored eyes is sharp enough to scare away the demons of hell with one glare.

His expression is grim, as if his sworn enemy is right before his eyes, and he only looks straight ahead. He has a detached air about him, as if he cannot even see the large crowd that has gathered here. It feels like if one were to call out to him, he would cut them down in the next instant.

In fact, the right arm whose hand is gripping the reins of the Nightmare is as sturdy as a statue depicting a legendary warrior of Spada. The newspaper article

contained incredible information that readers couldn't decide whether or not to believe, such as「he dual-wields greatswords」,「he threw a thirty-meter-long monster」and「he killed a Rank 5 monster bare-handed」, but his appearance now is enough to make everyone believe that it is all true.

However, for Erina who is close enough to Kurono to call herself his friend, she isn't surprised by his appearance.

「Eh, no way, that's...」

What surprises her is that Kurono is surrounded by two girls, the rumored『Fairy and witch bishoujo combo』, no less.

Indeed, Kurono isn't the only one riding the Nightmare; the two of them are riding on the same horse on either side of him, one in front of him and one behind.

The one sitting in front is the Fairy. However, it is more appropriate to call her a young girl than a bishoujo.

She has shining, long, platinum-blond hair and white skin. With round, emerald-colored eyes, she is indeed beautiful, but she looks like she needs another ten years of physical growth to be called a shoujo.

But the two pairs of wings on her back show that she is a Fairy; her body does not develop at the same speed as a human's.

The left hand that isn't holding the black reins is wrapped around the Fairy's small body.

The contrast between the evil-looking appearance befitting of a man belonging to the berserker class and the Fairy whose cuteness is worthy of the Fairy race is so extreme that the crowd is simply confused to see the two of them together.

One can only assume that the Fairy has been taken hostage, but she is wearing a childish, innocent smile and waving her leaf-like hand. The silent people lack the composure to respond to her.

But what catches Erina's attention is not the small girl, but the other person sitting behind Kurono.

「I-I see how it is... Witch Fiona, you are the likely winner, aren't you...?」

She is truly a bishoujo, a beautiful woman.

Anyone in Spada would say that her characteristic black clothing belongs to a witch. Erina has a good idea who she is, seeing her three-cornered hat and black robe.

Erina saw the information on the Guild Cards of Kurono's allies submitted for Kurono's Ranking-up procedure, and she remembers it accurately. She knows that the Fairy-class Lily, Witch-class Fiona and Berserker-class Kurono form the adventurer party『Element Masters.』

However, because Erina has never actually seen Kurono together with them, she had forgotten that they existed.

Thinking back carefully, she remembers seeing the distinct characteristics of the Fairy and witch at the academy district branch of the Adventurers' Guild that she works at.

And now she finally sees this party together for the first time, but one glance tells her that their relationship is not merely that of allies – Indeed, Fiona is clinging tightly to Kurono's back.

It is not simply because they are both riding on the same horse. Fiona is not straddling the horse's back, but sitting elegantly with her legs to one side.

One arm is firmly wrapped around Kurono's waist, and the upper half of her body that is covered in her black robe is leaning against his broad, sturdy back. She is like a princess who has been chosen by a prince on a white horse.

However, the mysterious-looking beautiful face that features golden eyes and light-blue hair looks blank and incredibly sleepy.

It is not the ecstatic expression befitting of a maiden in love. However, the fact that she is sitting behind Kurono as if it is only natural for her to do so stirs Erina's jealousy.

That witch shows no sign of interest in the crowd welcoming them and seems bored as she presses her body against Kurono's back. Erina is a smart woman, which is exactly why she doesn't want to think about how close the two of them

have to be for Fiona to cling to him so naturally.

「Grr... I won't lose either –」

「Oh, ooh! Is that the Greed-Gore?!」

「Uooh! It's huge!」

As Erina begins feels strong hostility towards the witch who appears to be showing off her relationship with Kurono, the crowd stirs once more.

The Greed-Gore, a ferocious Rank 5 monster. As if to prove that it was the Nightmare Berserker's fierce fighting that brought it down, its enormous corpse appears right behind Kurono.

Four Land Dragons are pulling a vehicle so large that it can barely fit through Spada's largest gates.

The object secured on top of the special load-carrying platform appears to look like an enormous, reddish-brown boulder.

However, if one looks carefully, it clearly resembles a bipedal, carnivorous dinosaur. It has short front legs in place of arms, powerful rear legs that it used to travel across the ground and a long tail. However, the ferocious head that is supposed to be there is nowhere to be seen.

In the newspaper article, it was written that the Greed-Gore's head had been cut off.

Everyone understood that the monster's head belongs to Kurono as he is the one who defeated it, and at the same time, they feel renewed fear at the seemingly bottomless hidden strength that he possesses.

Yes, fear.

Even the people of Spada, whose culture places great value on strength, simply shiver in the overwhelming presence Kurono radiates.

「Kuu~ So cool! Kurono-kun is the coolest!」

With the exception of a small portion of Spadan women.

Chapter 348

Note from the translator: For the sake of easier writing, I am using male pronouns such as “he”, “him”, “his” etc for Mia. Do keep in mind that Mia’s gender is ambiguous, though. Thanks to the sponsors for donating for this chapter! Enjoy~ Yoshi

When I suddenly wake up, I see an open black space – no, a throne.

「This is the Avalon royal castle of the Elroad Empire, isn’t it...?」

「Precisely. Welcome, Kurono Maou. I have been growing tired of waiting for your second visit to this place.」

On the black throne that looks like someone has compressed pure darkness to build it, there sits a lovely child who doesn’t seem to belong in such a grand place.

The child is wearing military clothes that resemble a school uniform, and a large cape that reaches all the way to the floor. His appearance is exactly how it was the last time I was here.

Yes, the ancient Demon King, Mia Elroad, has appeared in order to bestow new divine protections upon me.

「I’m glad you’ve recognized my victory over the trials.」

「Of course; it was a splendid battle to behold!」

Wearing a smile that covers his entire face, the Demon King claps his hands in applause. The sound of a single person’s applause echoing in this incredibly spacious place only adds to its sense of emptiness. Could it be that he is being sarcastic with his praise?

「Certainly not; your simultaneous victory over the second and third trials was beyond my expectations.」

Never mind the sarcasm; I feel like he’s lying straight to my face.

「I’d like you to stop looking at me with such distrustful eyes. The trials are generated just as I explained to you before.」

Even as a god, he cannot interfere with fate; everything is the result of nature running its course. That's what he told me.

「But I suppose I can't blame you for doubting me. These trials placed your friends in great danger, after all.」

Indeed; the things I feared when I was awarded the first divine protection came true straight away.

I'm not reluctant to accept the trials. But I don't want anyone to get involved in my battles with such dangerous monsters, let alone my friends and acquaintances – No, the Greed-Gore's army killed a significant number of people at both the village and the fortress.

If those people died because they were caught up in my trials, then... No, let's stop thinking about this. There's no end to my doubts, and there's no way to prove if I'm right or not.

What I need to be doing right now is thanking Mia, not doubting him.

「Thanks to the first divine protection, I was able to protect everyone. Thank you so much for giving this power to me.」

「Fufu, you're a kind person, aren't you? That's how you even deceived my descendant.」

「... Descendant?」

「Nell-chan.」

「I haven't deceived her!」

What a shrewd way of looking at it. I genuinely deepened my friendship with Nell; that's such an unfair way of saying it.

I don't think Mia will listen to anything I say, though. He's smiling maliciously.

「Actually, how do you even know about my relationship with Nell?」

「After flirting so much in front of everyone, I think it's more unreasonable for you to expect me not to suspect these things.」

「No, I didn't flirt with her, did I?」

「Well, the two of you did arrive at Iskia Fortress on the same horse.」

「We had no other way of getting there.」

「You did embrace Nell-chan after she Dispelled the monster army.」

「That's because she was about to collapse from using all of her mana.」

「Ah, that reminds me, at the Grand Coliseum you left the arena holding Nell in a princess-carry, didn't you?」

「I'm sorry, I got ahead of myself...」

Back then, I acted with no hesitation, but now that it's been pointed out to me, it's incredibly embarrassing.

「It's fine; as a god and as her ancestor, I'm not so uncouth as to comment on the love affairs of others.」

「Call it friendship, please. Well, Nell is so kind and defenseless that even I might misunderstand it, though.」

「Mhmm, I won't say anything.」

Mia decides not to comment. I wonder if there's any further meaning in my words that sound somewhat like excuses. Still, there's no need for him to avert his eyes so blatantly, is there?

「Still, to think that you were even watching the tournament.」

「I'm a god, after all. I see everything!」

I see, he has been solemnly watching over me from this throne room, or maybe from some truly godlike position above the clouds.

I'm sure he hasn't been acting like a spectator enjoying the show while munching on popcorn.

「Well then, I suppose I'll have you show me the proof that you have overcome the trials.」

Now it's finally the real deal. It was explained to me before that certain parts of the monsters are needed as proof. This time, I've prepared the proof properly on my own.

This place appears to be in my dreams, but it seems that my Shadow Gate is still connected to reality.

From my open shadow I summon the body pieces that I dissected from the corpses beforehand.

「The Greed-Gore's jaw and the Sloth-Gil's spine, these are the correct parts, right?」

What looks like a lump of red rock plunks down in front of me – but this is actually the Greed-Gore's jaw. To be more precise, it's the lower jaw. The sharp, densely-packed, upwards-pointing fangs almost make me relive the fear of this mouth trying to devour me.

Though I say I dissected the jaw, it's still covered in flesh and carapace; I simply separated it from the upper jaw.

The other piece of proof, the Sloth-Gil's spine, is just clean bone, like a specimen.

Right after I shot the Sloth-Gil in the head, the purple lightning surrounding its body disappeared completely, leaving only the skeleton of a Lamia, a monster with a human's head, arms and torso for the top half and a snake's tail for the bottom half.

I just had to detach the lower part of its body from the bottom of its collapsed skull, a much easier task than cutting away the Greed-Gore's enormous lower jaw. If Lily and Fiona hadn't helped me with that, it would definitely have taken me a lot of time.

「I accept these two pieces of evidence, the『Jaw of Greed』and『Spine of Sloth.』」

Like the Wrath-Pun's『Fist of Wrath』, they shine brightly before crumbling away. The『Jaw of Greed』shines orange while the『Spine of Sloth』glitters purple, and they both fade away as if being absorbed by Mia, who is sitting in the throne.

I have now offered these to him, which means my body should already contain the second and third divine protections. When I wake up from this dream, I'm sure I'll discover some new abilities.

I can already imagine what they could be.

The Greed-Gore of Greed was a monster of the earth element, while the Sloth-Gil of Sloth was a monster of the lightning element. I'm sure I'll be able to be able to artificially transform my black magical energy into these elements.

But the Demon King's divine protections have other powers.

「Fufu, it seems that you understand what powers the next divine protections will grant you.」

「Yeah. As well as『Force Boost』, I learned a little about modern magic* from Nell.」

TLN*: I should probably have mentioned this earlier, but what I've been translating as “modern magic” was previously translated as “Model magic” (I'm going off the kanji translation because “Model magic” makes no sense)

That's right, if I base my spells on modern magic spell formulas, I'll find the answers naturally.

「Well then, putting all pretenses aside, I suppose I can at least tell you their names. Using『Overdrive』is still dangerous for you; you need practice, don't you?」

「Thanks, I'll work hard – Ah, that reminds me...」

Hearing the word “practice”, I remember one more thing.

「Hmm, what is it?」

Mia tilts his head in an adorable way, just like how Lily does in her child form. I frankly express my concerns without hiding anything.

「Actually, I heard from Will that there's going to be a victory parade when we return to Spada. I was wondering what I need to do.」

「I see, you did play a very important part in the victory, after all!」

Rescuing the students and defeating the Greed-Gore weren't things that I achieved on my own, but I do realize that I'm the one who played the most outstanding role. And unlike with the Wrath-Pun, I did finish it off properly, too.

This incident was on such a scale that the king personally led the knights out to rescue the students. Since I was the one who led us to victory, I would be the

main part of the parade. Will fiercely insisted that he would make me the main part of it, so I couldn't refuse.

Of course, it's not like I'm completely against it. I suppose if you're a man, you aspire to be a hero.

「A victory parade, huh. That takes me back.」

Mia-chan says this with a distant look in his eyes.

I wonder if he's reliving his old glory. To me, he just looks like a young child basking in the happy memory of going to an amusement park.

However, Mia is the legendary Demon King who, in the distant past, made many triumphant returns after victories in battle.

「I thought that you would have plenty of experience when it comes to parades, Mia, so I was hoping to get a piece of advice.」

「Yes, that was a good decision, Kurono Maou. Even though it's a victory parade, the festivity can be embarrassing. You can't let it get to your head and make a peace sign or anything like that, okay?」

「You made a peace sign?」

The Demon King turns his head away and exercises his right to remain silent. Ah, he made a peace sign. I'm sure he made double peace signs with a self-satisfied look on his face.

「Anyway! If you're the main part of the parade, you have to act the part properly!」

As Mia boldly stands up from his throne, suddenly full of enthusiasm, I can't help but to feel a little defeated.

He doesn't have to get so serious, I was just hoping that he could teach me a little trick or something to help me prepare, but...

「Alright, well then, I will train you so that you won't feel embarrassed no matter what parade you take part in! I won't let you return until we're finished!」

「A-are you serious...」

Thus, I gratefully receive the personal instruction of the Demon King in order to learn how to act in a victory parade.

But, well, I suppose the real thing will go perfectly after this. There's no doubt that the people of Spada welcoming us will be cheering and clapping loudly.

「Now then, take one, here we go!」

Chapter 349

It's evening on the 4th of the Month of Blue Moon (Sougetsu). We made it through the victory parade without incident – no, the spectators had no reaction to us at all; it was quite an empty-feeling parade... Anyway, we've finally made it back. Back to this worn-down dormitory in the Royal Spada Academy.

「We're baaack!」

Three voices, with Lily's being the loudest, echo out in this entrance that's a little cold from the autumn wind getting in through a gap somewhere. Man, this dormitory is really worn down.

「But coming back here makes you really feel at ease, doesn't it?」

「I agree.」

「Right!」

My right arm is holding onto Lily, while Fiona is snuggling against my left. I really have flowers in both of my hands* right now. The small tinge of loneliness that I feel despite this isn't a luxury, by any means.

TLN*: 両手に花/ryoute ni hana translates to “having flowers in both hands”, which is a Japanese phrase that means “to be in between two beautiful women”.

「I hope that Simon can hurry and come back as well.」

Simon, the true landlord of this dormitory, will not be coming back here today.

Thanks to Nell's treatment, Simon made a full recovery from the injuries he sustained when he was attacked by the Morjura, but both his physical and mental strength have been exhausted. What Simon needs right now isn't treatment, but rest.

「He is with Emilia-san, so he will get better soon.」

The Bardiel house is a large noble family, one of Spada's Four Great Noble

Houses, so I'm sure Simon is living the best lifestyle for recuperation there is.

Simon seems to really not get along with his older sister, but just like after the battle of Alzas, they'll definitely take good care of him.

「I am sure that he is currently crying tears of happiness at the devotion with which Emilia-san is nursing him.」

「Y-you think so?」

From what I heard from Simon, I can't imagine his older sister being that type of person, but... No, Fiona did say that she personally met her at some point; Fiona trusts her enough to be able to say this with confidence.

Either way, Simon is currently experiencing the warmth of being nursed by his family, and there's nothing better than that.

「You know, Lily gave him the Fairies' Miracle Medicine, so he'll be fine!」

「Ah, you're right.」

Now that she mentions it, I used the Fairies' Miracle Medicine for the luxurious purpose of removing my paralysis, so I'm completely out. I'll have to ask her to make more.

I really don't know when the trials will appear, so I need to be well-prepared.

But I'm sure I won't get punished for taking it easy tonight. Please, Mia-chan, spare me another trial for now.

「By the way, Kurono-san, it is almost time for dinner, isn't it?」

Fiona's stomach gives a hearty grumble. There is no better way for her to express herself.

「For now, should we get changed first?」

I don't want to be wearing this coat with a ripped right sleeve forever, and since I've just gone through battle after battle while wearing it, it's really dirty.

「Yes, we will eat a little later, then. I will retrieve the souvenirs from Avalon and wait in the lounge.」

I see, Fiona went to Avalon. She was supposed to be training, but she was kind enough to buy souvenirs – no, she was probably dazzled by tasty souvenirs

that she wanted to eat herself.

We've only just got back and Fiona's already acting like herself, I think warmly as I head for my own room with Lily.

「It's been a while since I've been back in this room.」

If I recall, we left this place on the 25th of the Month of Platinum (Hakkin). The last time I was here was when I left excitedly to take place in the『Curse Carnival.』

To think that I would receive that emergency request right after my match... Looking back on it, that was incredible timing.

「Lily wanted to come home quickly as well. Lily is lonely when she can't sleep together with Kurono!」

Saying such adorable words, Lily behaves like a spoiled child. Ah, Lily really is cute.

「I was lonely without you too, Lily.」

Fufufu, I can say farewell to the lonely nights where I'm sleeping alone. Thinking this impure thought, I put Lily down on the bed.

Lily rolls around on the bed, giggling. The hem of her one-piece dress has worked its way up, exposing her bottom that is covered by her white silk underwear, but I don't really pay it any attention.

「Hey, Lily, aren't you going to get changed, too?」

「Ye~es!」

With an enthusiastic response, she opens the light Dimension with her small hands and takes out the robe made of the fur of a Punpun, or the White-pun robe for short.

The reason she is holding the robe out towards me is certainly not because she wants me to wear it, but because she wants me to help her put it on.

Normally, Lily would easily be able to get changed on her own. But damn it, right now I have the urge to spoil her, so I have no choice. The child-form Lily is good at being spoiled. So good that it makes me wonder if she has me dancing

on the palm of her hand.

Well, even if that's the case, I'm happy to dance as much as she wants. And so I gladly take the robe to help her get changed.

「Alright, banzai.」

「Banza~ai!」

TLN: For those who don't know, "banzai" is an action where you raise both arms over your head

With the enthusiasm of someone about to do radio calisthenics*, Lily straightens out her back and holds both arms up high. I grab a hold of the hem of her one-piece dress and lift it straight up.

TLN*: Warm-up exercises broadcast over radio in Japan

I am once again faced with the white underwear of a little girl. I also see her soft, white stomach with that little bit of roundness that's unique to little girls, and her small belly button.

Oops, I have to be careful so that it doesn't get caught on her wings. They're transparent and look like they're made of light, but these things do physically exist.

Lily points her upper wings upwards and her lower wings downwards so that they are almost vertical and don't get caught up in her dress.

Nice, I managed to get it off.

With the one-piece dress removed, she is only wearing a single pair of underwear.

Seeing her almost fully naked, it reminds me of when I first met her not that long ago. Starting with this black Ancient velvet one-piece dress, I've gotten used to seeing Lily in various different clothes, but she was completely naked at first. Now that I think about it, it seems kind of outrageous.

「Okay, gabah.」

「Gabah!」

I make a random onomatopoeic sound as I pull the White-pun robe over her

head in one movement.

With the hood that has long rabbit ears attached pulled over her head, the transformation from a cute fairy into a wild Punpun is complete.

「Alright, we're done.」

「Thanks, Kurono!」

Don't mention it. I got to enjoy Lily's cuteness; in fact, I'm the one who wants to thank her.

Huh, these thoughts sound kind of lolicon-like... No, no, they're not, definitely not.

In a very pleasant mood, I finally throw『Diablo's Embrace』off my body while gazing at Lily's bottom and its round rabbit tail as she rolls around once more.

I have to launder this guy thoroughly tomorrow. It really put its heart into enduring those fierce battles.

And so I finish changing into new pants and a shirt, giving me a rough appearance. Now then, time to go to the lounge to eat Fiona's souvenirs from Avalon –

「Say, Kurono.」

But at that moment, Lily calls out to me. Her voice has a somewhat cold tone that clearly doesn't sound like her child form, but more like her juvenile form.

「Yeah, what is it, Lily?」

Lily herself is still in her child form, still on all-fours on the bed. With her bottom that has a tail attached to it still facing me, she twists around to look at me.

「This white feather, what is it?」

Huh, Lily-san? Your eyes are a little scary...

Lily, who is now radiating a presence like the Wrath-Pun's, has found a single feather on the bed. I have a very good idea who it belongs to.

Nell Julius Elroad. The kind-hearted First Princess of Avalon, the second friend I made in Spada.

Friend. That's right, on the day that Nell and I made it clear that we are friends, at that time, she was sitting on the bed in my room. She did more than just sit on it; she flapped her wings around and reacted quite intensely, so there's a high chance that this feather was left there back then.

Well, even if that's not the case, there were several occasions where I invited her to my room to have her teach me magic, and she often sat on my bed. It's not strange for there to be a feather or two left on the bed.

Now of all times, the sharp-sighted Lily has discovered this feather here. And with that discovery comes a great misunderstanding...

Note from the author: Please look forward to the next, final chapter of Kuro no Maou:『Kurono dies.』(Just kidding.)

Chapter 350

「So with that, let's start the first Element Masters emergency meeting.」

「The topic of discussion concerns Kurono-san bringing the princess of Avalon to his bed during our absence.」

「No no no, wait, just wait a minute.」

The lounge that was supposed to be filled with a light-hearted atmosphere as we told stories about our journeys has instead turned into a danger zone with a strained air of tension.

I'm seated in a chair. Opposite me is Lily in her White-pun robe who has taken the effort to transform into her juvenile form, and Fiona standing in an imposing stance, holding the『Ainz Bloom』for some reason, even though we're indoors. I can feel their spirit; they look ready to fight a Rank 5 monster right now.

However, there's no way that there's a powerful monster here. I've just been forced to sit here on this chair in the middle of the room by myself and face these two.

Because I'm sitting down, my eyes are around the same height as Fiona's. It feels like I'm the only one whose height has been reduced – in other words, I feel intimidated.

「Yes, we will wait. Until Kurono-san spits out everything.」

「Hey, Kurono, you will tell us everything honestly, right?」

Lily's eyes are directly telling me that even if I lie, she'll know because of her telepathy. Freaking scary.

Wait a minute, what is this, what the hell is this?! Has a new trial started for me?!

I wonder why things look so hopeless for me. My mind was more at ease when I was fighting the Greed-Gore compared to being cast into this hell.

「Kurono?」

「Ah, err, umm... This is, you know...」

And so, as I fumbled my words, broke out in a cold sweat and became flustered and desperate, I talked. I said everything.

How I met Nell and had her teach me magic, how I taught her how to cook, my appearance in the『Curse Carnival』, my victory, the injury of my right arm, the treatment of that injury. And finally, the battle at Iskia Fortress.

As Fiona said, I spat everything out.

What a development, how laughable. I'd thought that I played a huge role that I could boast about to these two, but who would have thought that I'd be telling them my story feeling like this...

「— so, that's how I became friends with Nell.」

「Hmm, I see.」

「I see, that's how it was.」

「I'm so glad you two understand —」

「Kurono, you're too defenseless.」

「Kurono-san, you are too defenseless.」

Huh, why are they saying that? I thought I completely resolved the misunderstanding, but the words being said to me are entirely unexpected. And both of them gave the exact same response, as if they'd arranged it beforehand. And their gazes are still cold.

「O-oi, what do you mean, I'm too defenseless?」

The defenseless one is Nell, isn't she? She came into contact with a man like me showing no signs of wariness right from the beginning. Most importantly, the distance between us was small, I mean physically. Isn't it just that she's a person with only ten centimeters of personal space?

「You can't do that, Kurono. You have to be more wary of women that approach you.」

「Yes, because you can never tell what kind of ulterior motives they might have.」

「No, isn't it the woman who has to be more wary –」

Fiona's staff strikes the floor with a thud. Please don't do that, Fiona-san, it's really scary.

「Listen, Kurono-kun. Women are monsters.」

What is that logic? It's equivalent to the saying that all men are wolves*. But Lily's eyes are dead-serious.

TLN*: This is a Japanese phrase that implies that men only want sex.

「A man like Kurono-san is a reasonable trophy, isn't he?」

I wonder if that's supposed to be a compliment. Thanks to the look in Fiona's eye that's as if she's looking down on me, I don't feel like it's a compliment at all.

「But I've never had any experience with being particularly popular with women.」

In today's parade, the women were squealing for Nero, the prince on a white horse. That should be what you call popular with women.

My practice with Mia-chan was in vain; the women didn't make a single sound, let alone cheer for me. No matter how you look at it, there's no way you can say that I managed to win their hearts. In fact, I seemed to have repelled them.

「I'm the one who knows the most about Kurono's charms –」

「No, I know much about Kurono-san's charms as well.」

「Objectively speaking, Kurono has quite a lot of attractive elements.」

I-I don't know about that... Those are flattering words that I don't find very convincing. I can only assume that she's biased towards me.

「First, your kindness. One could say that you're a hopelessly soft-hearted person.」

「You forgive me without getting angry even when I hit you with heavy friendly fire.」

Well, I don't think I'm the short-tempered type, but I'm still a man who

wouldn't think twice about murdering someone if I get really angry. I've already killed countless numbers of Crusader soldiers and those masked guys from the research laboratory.

And Fiona, it's true that I don't get angry even if I receive friendly fire, but I do get scared.

「And you're strong. There aren't many people who could defeat you, Kurono.」

「You're completely fine even if I hit you with friendly fire.」

Indeed, even I have the confidence to say that I won't lose a fight easily. It would be impossible for me to win against an Apostle, or Fiona and Lily if they fought me together, though.

And Fiona, if I take damage, I feel pain like a normal person. Don't misunderstand.

「You're tall, and your body is so well-tempered that even the knights of Spada are nothing in comparison.」

「You have a nice body, Kurono-san. You may take your clothes off right here.」

I've always thought that my height was the only thing about me as a man that I could feel proud of, ever since I was a high school student. Well, it only adds to the scary, intimidating air that my face gives off, though.

My body is something that was forcibly remodeled this way during my time in the laboratory. I don't really train my body now; in fact, I'm spending all my time learning about magic.

And I'm just going to ignore Fiona's nonchalant sexual harassment.

「And your face is – ah, mmmm, I think it's handsome, but I suppose everyone has different tastes.」

「Yes, it's scary enough to make a child cry, isn't it?」

「UOOH! It's like that after all, is it?! Damn it!」

Even Lily can't help but to agree with Fiona's comment on my villainous-looking face.

Ah, that makes me miss Shirasaki-san who would look down and tremble in fear every time she saw me.

So it's true that Lily, Fiona and also Nell are all special exceptions who are quite open-minded when it comes to a person's appearance. I'm more terrible at making first impressions than anything else, so that's something that I'm grateful for.

「Anyway, just looking at these superficial things, there are so many attractive things about you, Kurono. I'm sure any Spadan woman with an interest in strong men would take a liking to you.」

「Of course, those factors are not the only reasons why Lily-san and I are with you, Kurono-san.」

Yeah, even I know that much, Fiona. You two are definitely special to me after all.

「But that doesn't mean that all women will truly understand you like me and Fiona do, Kurono.」

「That is what I meant when I said that you can never tell what ulterior motives they might have. Kurono-san, when ladies approach you, you unwarily treat them with kindness as if it were only natural, don't you?」

Th-that's... I do my best not to be rude. And, well, I am a man, so I don't have any negative feelings if a woman calls out to me.

「And once you get close to someone, you don't abandon them easily, do you, Kurono?」

「That's why there is a risk of your goodwill being taken advantage of, Kurono-san.」

Even though Fiona calls it goodwill, I don't think my interactions with women are out of the ordinary. Just because they're my friends doesn't mean that I'd lend them huge sums of money without thinking, co-sign a contract with them or become their accomplice in a crime.

「Well, I understand what the two of you are trying to say. The world isn't all filled with virtuous people.」

In fact, in this world, it's the bad people who have everything going their way. Of course, I've met even more good people than bad ones, and had to say goodbye to many as well.

「Yes, that's it, even you have the common sense to understand that, Kurono.」

「But Kurono-san, you're still defenseless.」

Eh, so in the end we've come back to where we started. I don't really understand, just what exactly about me is defenseless?!

「I'll take this opportunity to make it clear. There's something suspicious about that princess of Avalon.」

「... Huh?」

As Lily declares this with a stern expression, I inadvertently let out a stupid-sounding noise.

「Look, Lily-san, it looks like he had no caution after all.」

I'm the only one who doesn't understand. Just what about that kind-hearted Nell are Lily and Fiona so wary of?

「But there might be no helping that. After all, Kurono isn't from this world to begin with.」

「You're right; Kurono's homeland of Japan or something is apparently a society without noblemen or slaves.」

「... Is it the fact that Nell's a member of the royal family that's bad?」

Both of them let out a small sigh. The way they sigh at the exact same time is incredible, as if they calculated it. Sure enough, that's the answer.

「Exactly. Forming irregular relationships not officially recognized by others with royal family members is a dangerous business.」

「Eh, but Will is –」

「That* is fine.」

TLN*: Lily is referring to Wilhart himself with the use of “that” here.

「I agree; that person is alright.」

What's with that difference in reactions? Is this what you call a disparity in popularity? And Lily, you said "that"...

「Prince Wilhart is a person that is alright to trust. He shows symptoms of being a daydreamer and making thoughtless remarks, but he is still able to tell the difference between delusions and reality.」

「Telepathy is a truly convenient ability, isn't it?」

I see. Will's brain went through Lily's telepathy check without me even noticing. I'll keep quiet about this; let's make this an Element Masters secret.

「But that princess... I couldn't see much of what she was thinking. I am guessing that she has telepathic abilities herself.」

「Yeah, though they're not as great as yours, Lily. She can't read your emotions unless she directly touches –」

「Did she touch you?」

「Eh?」

「Did she touch you, Kurono-san?」

As Fiona asks me this question, her eyes are extremely serious. Her usual sleepy-looking eyes have opened slightly wider, and there's a flaming brightness to the light in her golden pupils.

In the next moment, the staff in her hand gives off a pressuring aura, as if she's going to suddenly release a fire-magic attack.

「Well, we did hold hands. Thanks to that, I was able to learn『Force Boost』, and that turned out to be the key to awakening my first divine protection. You know, it's really amazing, this『Overdrive』–」

「That's not... what I mean...」

As if enduring some kind of pain, Fiona quickly turns her face away and speaks in a strained voice.

「Calm down, Fiona.」

「... I'm sorry.」

Just what was such a shock to her? Fiona's trademark three-cornered hat is pulled low over her face so that I can't see her expression.

I'm somewhat surprised by the unusual sight of Fiona losing her composure – actually, I remember when the ring I gave to Fiona broke and she continued to hit the devilish murderer Joto after he had already died. A chill runs down my spine as this memory flashes through my head.

「There is a chance that she looked around your memories when she did that, Kurono.」

It can't be; there's no way that Nell would do something that's equivalent to stepping all over someone's privacy with muddy feet. But the only one who believes that is me, because I've spent time with her.

「But there's no way that we can confirm that now. Be careful from now on, okay? Watch out for telepathy users other than me.」

「That reminds me, Lily-san, you have tried to search through my mind as well, haven't you?」

Fiona, who seems to have regained her composure, nonchalantly asks this frank question. Of course, Lily ignores it magnificently.

In any case, it was careless for me to have put myself in a situation where my thoughts could be read while knowing that Nell has telepathic abilities. But if there were a telepathy-user as powerful as Lily who could read my mind just by standing in front of me, then there's no way to deal with it unless I have a Mind-Protecting Magic Item.

Still, it's only because Nell used her telepathy that I could understand the spell formulas of modern magic...

「It seems that you trust that princess quite a bit, Kurono, but the problem is that your relationship with her involves more than just the two of you.」

That's what Lily meant by「irregular relationships not officially recognized by others」, I suppose.

「Sorry, how do I put it... I just completely forgot about it until now... I'm known as the「Villainous Tentacle Man」or「Nightmare Berserker」here in the

academy, after all...」

If a man with such clearly dangerous-sounding titles called himself a friend of the beautiful princess, nobody would understand. If I was in their shoes, there's no doubt that I'd consider it ridiculous.

「Even if there weren't those annoying, disgraceful rumors about you, I am sure that a mere male adventurer coming close to the princess would generate a lot of animosity, Kurono-san.」

That response is certainly easy to imagine. Actually, I'm an idiot for not having given that a single thought up until now.

Though this is only an excuse, maybe because I was lonely from not having Lily and Fiona around, I subconsciously spoiled myself with Nell's presence.

「Say, Kurono, didn't anyone harass you while we weren't here? If they did, let me know and I'll punish them for you right away.」

「Yes, I shall make them explode for you.」

「Ah, no, there's nothing to worry about in that regard for now.」

Th-that reminds me, right after the incident in the dining hall, these two got really angry, didn't they? I'm happy that they're willing to do so much for me as a friend, but they seem a little like they're not joking. They might seriously go on a rampage, so I'm slightly scared.

For now, if it's harassment on the level of someone putting pins in my indoor shoes or scrawling on my desk, I'll keep it quiet from these two. Well, we don't wear indoor shoes at the academy, nor do we have our own personal desks.

「But still, the biggest problem is that we don't know just how that princess is going to meddle with Kurono.」

「Meddle, you say... She hasn't been a bother at all; in fact, she's done nothing but help me.」

「No, since Lily-san was unable to find out her true intentions, we don't know what she is planning. Even if she does not plan to deceive you, Kurono-san, if she is unexpectedly harmed or the people are set against you, in the worst case scenario, you will be executed for crimes against royalty.」

Th-there it is... Execution for crimes against royalty... So there's a chance of that happening after all...

「Even if that doesn't happen, it would be simple for someone of a royal family to destroy a single adventurer's life.」

The scene of Nell shouting,「I'm telling you to stand down, aren't I? I'll have you executed for treason!」in the arena flashes through my mind.

Indeed, she's capable of not only destroying someone's life, but ending it. Very easily, with a single half-hearted order.

Though it's a bit late, I start to wonder if that Chris-something lady is alright.

「If she intends to do so, then she definitely can, and even if she doesn't, it is still possible for those around her to misunderstand and go on a rampage.」

「If it were just a matter of not being able to use the Adventurers' Guild, it would not be such a serious matter. But if you were declared wanted by the entire nation of Avalon, you would have bigger things to worry about than fighting the Crusaders.」

「Th-that would be... bad.」

「Yes, bad.」

「It is very bad.」

Damn, I've been horribly oblivious to this potential disaster up until now. I didn't grasp the true meaning of the fact that Nell is a member of a royal family. At most, I guess I thought of her in the same way I thought of one of my female high school classmates that was from a really wealthy family.

「Kurono, you're ignorant to the differences in social positions.」

「When it comes to dealing with royal family members and nobles, there is a thing known as an appropriate sense of distance. If you were to be friends with the princess and treat her in the same way that you treat us, Kurono-san... You can't do that.」

I-I see... I finally understand why these two got so angry, no, I suppose they aren't angry, but I can see the reason they got so serious.

「Sorry, my carelessness has caused you guys to worry unnecessarily.」

At first, I was firmly under the impression that I was in trouble because they thought that I'd brought a girl into my bed while they weren't here, but... Damn it, what a stupid misunderstanding on my part.

Even though Lily and Fiona were just really worried about me.

「It's fine now that you understand, Kurono.」

「And we will never leave your side from now on, so do not worry, Kurono-san.」

Gentle smiles finally return to their faces.

「Thanks. I'll be more careful from now on as well.」

And so I realize once again just how blessed I am to have these party members, and with that, the first Elemental Masters emergency meeting comes to an end.

Note from the author: To those of you who were expecting a scene of carnage, my sincerest apologies. This was Lily's plan – to pretend that there would be a scene of carnage, then to have Kurono avoid Nell of his own accord while simultaneously increasing his positive feelings and trust in herself.

Chapter 351

The room is as large as a gymnasium, but it's nowhere near as dreary. It's covered in magnificent decorations, as if the best of this world's luxuries and craftsmanship has been concentrated in one place.

If I look to my right, there is a row of statues portraying gallant warriors that I can only imagine must have been modelled after ancient heroes. If I look to my left, there are sculptures depicting goddesses of war that possess both beauty and strength. These works of art aren't stone statues, but crystal sculptures. Among them is a statue of a greatsword-wielding warrior wearing a cape, and a female knight with full-body armor and a spear – ah, that's right, those two are the same people positioned at the Royal Spada Academy's main gate. I'm sure they're particularly famous heroes in Spada. I don't know who they are or what they did, though.

In addition to these crystal statues that make a pile of 10,000,000 Klans seem worthless in comparison, the surface of the enormous walls are embellished with cloths of a vivid crimson color. Two crossed swords and a crown have been embroidered onto the cloths using shining, golden thread – Spada's coat of arms. While its design is simple, Spada's national flag has a majestic feel to it when held aloft.

Incidentally, the carpet beneath my feet is made of the same pure-red cloth as the national flags. The long, narrow carpet continues forward like a road, and at the end of it, there's an enormous seat decorated with gold and crimson ornaments.

In other words, that's the royal throne.

That's right, the place that I'm in right now is the throne room in Spada's royal castle.

「Adventurer Kurono, step forward.」

「Yes.」

That was close, my voice almost came out high-pitched because I'm so

nervous. My heart is pounding and cold sweat is dripping down the back of my neck. Even so, I somehow manage to maintain a poker face.

Well, that could be because my face has stiffened up and is unable to display any facial expression right now. It was like this during the parade, too.

And so, after being called by some kind of Spadan minister, I continue my steps forward – in other words, towards the king who resides on the throne in front of me.

I'm so nervous that I feel the urge to look back at Lily and Fiona who are behind me, but I resist. I also feel the urge to glance at the knights, civil officials and the other important-looking people who are standing in lines, but I resist that as well.

Calm down. In a situation like this, I just need to look straight ahead and maintain my body's current dead-serious behavior.

To think that my practice with Mia-chan would show its results in a situation like this.

Ah, of course, I'm not just talking about the place that I'm in. I'm talking about the ceremony that's happening in this throne room.

Well, there's only one thing that this ceremony could be for.

「Adventurer Kurono, your actions in Iskia were –」

This minister makes a drawn-out, roundabout congratulatory speech that still somehow manages to skip over most of the details. As he says, I'm being praised for my deeds at Iskia Fortress.

I do feel that I played a big role that I can feel proud for once, but I'd never expected that I'd be summoned to the royal castle for such a large ceremony.

Today is the 6th of the Month of Blue Moon (Sougetsu). The day after I spent the whole day resting after returning to Spada, it was decided that there would be a ceremony to award a decoration to those who performed great deeds in the Battle of Iskia.

Incidentally, I heard about this ceremony from Will, who had visited the dormitory yesterday evening with his usual loud laughter.

I thought it was way too sudden, but it's not like my opinion would change anything, and it's not such a trivial event that I could choose not to attend because it's a bother.

Actually, I don't have a formal suit. I'm attending this ceremony in my academy uniform. Well, it's true that I'm a student, so nobody will think I'm stingy.

「Fu, be happy, Kurono. Spada has finally recognized – no, realized the ability of the Nightmare Berserker! Causing black shivers that freeze the spines of the people, a new hero of darkness is born – Kurono, the leading part in tomorrow's act is you.」

Stop it, Will; that puts a lot of pressure on me. I don't really understand what he's saying, but I can understand that there are huge expectations of me and I'm going to get a lot of attention.

Though this may be obvious, I don't have a single shred of experience in being celebrated in a public place like this.

This isn't on the level of appearing at the Koushien stadium* and being cheered for and congratulated by my whole school.

TLN*: The stadium where the Japan National High School Baseball Tournament is held

Being awarded a decoration by the king of Spada means that the country has formally acknowledged my achievements. Will saying that it's the birth of a hero might not necessarily be an exaggeration.

I understand it, but that doesn't mean I agree with it. Why me, I mean, is it alright for it to be me? With only these confused thoughts constantly running through my head, I wasn't able to sleep much last night.

Oops, I can't be yawning at a time like this. I have to stiffen up and concentrate.

「– and so, his majesty King Leonhart praises your service in battle and awards you this decoration.」

Oh, it's finally time! This thought runs through my mind not because of the

minister's solemn words, but because I've finally arrived in front of the king.

The king who rules Spada, Leonhart Tristan Spada.

His pure-red hair and golden eyes are indeed just like Will's. But they look nothing alike.

His physique is similar to mine or even larger. Even though he's covered in an extravagant red cape suitable for a king, I can tell that he's trained his body to the limits. I can see his bulging shoulder muscles and the thick wrists emerging from his sleeves.

It's not just his appearance; his stance doesn't leave any vulnerable openings.

Even if I were to perform a surprise attack on King Leonhart with my hatchet right now, he would be able to deal with it. Actually, I wonder if I could win if I fought him fair and square... While thinking the thoughts of a battle-crazed lunatic, I stand before him and salute as I was instructed to do beforehand.

I curl my right hand loosely into a fist and press it against the left side of my chest. This is the Spada-style salute. After that is, err, oh yeah, get down on one knee, right?

Even if that wasn't right, I feel like I would kneel naturally. That's how overwhelming King Leonhart's presence is. Hmm, I guess I might not be able to win against him in my current state.

「Hmm, Adventurer Kurono, raise your eyes.」

As King Leonhart stands up from his throne and opens his mouth, my nervousness peaks –

Leonhart is interested in the man named Kurono. He has held this interest since before the events in Iskia.

The first time he saw that name was in a report submitted by the Adventurers' Guild. Its contents were regarding an emergency quest issued in Daidalos.

Emergency Quest – Escort the refugees

Reward: Undecided

Time period: Undecided

Contractor: Adventurers' Guild of Daidalos

Contents of request: It has been decided to evacuate all villagers to Spada. The vigilante corps of each village are in charge of escorting them. You adventurers are wanted in position behind the villagers to suppress the enemy as much as possible and buy enough time for the villagers to evacuate. No information is known about the enemy other than that they are a human army. This is a quest of unprecedented danger, but the lives of all the villagers are in your hands. We request that you brave adventurers participate in the evacuation effort.

And then it was recorded that this quest had ended in『failure.』

After the Crusader army assaulted Daidalos's capital district, they began an inhumane occupation regime in the region's villages. Thus, the intelligence department was able to confirm that this emergency quest had been issued.

According to the document, the number of refugees fleeing to Spada from all of the villages in Daidalos's western region was about ten thousand. Three hundred adventurers accepted the emergency quest.

From those, fifteen refugees and four adventurers made it to Spada alive. It was such a great loss that calling it a failure was an understatement.

But if all of the testimonies of the adventurers written in that report were to be believed, Kurono had led a mere 103 adventurers and held out for one week despite being outnumbered ten to one – an impressive feat, even if they were annihilated in the end.

And this wasn't achieved at a fortress with sturdy defenses such as the Galahad Stronghold, but in an ordinary countryside village called Alzas.

Could such a thing be possible?

No, thought Leonhart. He doubted that he himself could do what Kurono, a mere Rank 1 adventurer at the time, had supposedly done.

Perhaps Leonhart was overthinking things. But because he was such a battle-loving man himself, he thought it was more accurate to say that this

overthinking was a result of his imagination running wild. He decided not to give it any more thought, and he should have forgotten Kurono's name after that.

However, Leonhart heard the name Kurono once more.

He heard it from Wilhart, who was one of his beloved sons despite his dishonorable nickname of The Delusional Prince that was spreading among the people.

He had heard that Wilhart was, unlike his older brother Aisenhart or his younger sister Charlotte, extremely unpopular at the academy. But one day, Leonhart received a letter telling of Wilhart's new friend who had saved his life, and the imminent threat of the Crusaders.

Wilhart has no abilities to speak of when it comes to fighting, but Leonhart knows that he is more sharp-minded than anyone else in the family, including Leonhart himself. In fact, it is difficult to believe that Leonhart, who knew nothing but combat, is the father of such an intelligent son. Even Wilhart's mother was, well, not much different from Leonhart, though he wouldn't tell her that.

In any case, it was quite a surprise to hear that Wilhart had made a friend that he could confide in.

Soon after that letter had arrived, the Crusader army's presence was detected around the Galahad Stronghold when it was investigated and Leonhart became certain that Kurono's achievements were true, surprising him even further.

The depths of Kurono's ability was unfathomable. Leonhart knew that the Wrath-Pun, the Rank 5 monster that Kurono had rescued Wilhart from, was at least as strong as Leonhart himself was twenty years ago.

The ones who actually slayed the beast were those of『Wing Road』, but because Leonhart had fought a Wrath-Pun before in the past, he understood.

It was not an opponent that was naïve enough to let its prey make a convenient escape. Unless one demonstrated power that exceeded the Wrath-Pun's, it would give endless chase, never allowing escape.

Kurono had succeeded in driving the Wrath-Pun away because he possessed

enough strength to remind the Wrath-Pun of its own mortality. Leonhart was sure of this because he had heard that the Wrath-Pun's greatest weapon, its right arm, had been cut off. Of course, there was no evidence other than Kurono's own testimony that he was the one who had cut it off, but Leonhart had already decided that there was no more room for doubt.

And for Kurono, who had already surprised Leonhart twice, to do it a third time – no, Leonhart expected that this would happen.

He couldn't imagine that a man with such hidden power would be content with forever being a Rank 3 adventurer, a mere academy student at that. He anticipated – no, knew for certain that Kurono and the adventurer party that he belonged to would make their name known throughout Spada before long.

The only surprise is that he did it so quickly.

Thus, Kurono has finally appeared before Leonhart, the king of Spada.

「Hmm, Adventurer Kurono, raise your eyes.」

A fine facial expression. That is Leonhart's first impression of him.

Despite standing before the king of a nation, that expression shows no sign of tension or unrest.

That black hair and single red eye make Leonhart question whether he could be an illegitimate son of his friend, the king of Avalon. If that is the case and he was secretly given high-quality education, that would explain how he is maintaining this calm, self-possessed composure.

Leonhart cannot imagine the king of Avalon going behind his wives' backs and having an affair with another woman, however.

「Your actions in Iskia were truly admirable.」

Kurono's red and black eyes that look straight ahead of him are reflected in Leonhart's own. Leonhart cannot read any emotion from that sharp glint in his eyes. It is impossible that he is feeling happy or in high spirits.

Does he feel that this is only natural, given his ability? This is not an arrogant thought; he simply acknowledges reality.

In that case, this ceremony must be terribly tedious for him. At the very least,

it is for Leonhart. No, rather than being tedious, he feels as if he is being forced to hold himself back.

With such a man before him, Leonhart cannot help but feel an urge to challenge him to a duel on the spot. Kurono's presence is similar to the white one that he felt at the Galahad Stronghold.

Nobody else in this place can see it, but Leonhart's eyes – yes, the golden pupils that harbor one of his divine protections,『Rival Search』– can clearly see the black aura that resembles pure darkness surrounding Kurono's body.

Just what kind of power is Kurono hiding? He rides a Nightmare, manipulates cursed weapons and wields black magic. Battle abilities that Leonhart has never seen or heard of. And the aura of darkness wrapped around him, is this the divine protection of a god...? Leonhart truly wants to challenge him to a contest.

Suppressing that desire completely, Leonhart solemnly says some generic words to finish this tedious ceremony.

「I praise your deeds and award you this decoration with my authority as the 52nd king of Spada, Leonhart Tristan Spada –」

Chapter 352

I gratefully received two decorations on this occasion.

The first is the『Crown Medal.』

This is presented to those who have performed great achievements for the nation of Spada. It can be granted to anyone regardless of their social standing, so it's the decoration that is most commonly awarded in Spada.

Even so, the citizens of Spada praise those awarded with this decoration more than those given decorations that are awarded only to noblemen for trivial things. In other words, this decoration is proof that I did a great thing.

Well, not that anyone gave me any praise.

The other decoration I was awarded was the『Adventurer Services Decoration.』

This is given to adventurers who make great efforts in things like the completion of emergency quests. Each nation in Pandora has a similar decoration, though their names might differ from country to country. Of course, it's not the nation that authorizes the awarding of this decoration, but the Adventurers' Guild.

In Spada, certain privileges are granted to those awarded this『Adventurer Services Decoration.』

「To think that I'd suddenly become a Rank 5 adventurer...」(Kurono)

In my hand, next to the medal that has a design with a sword and a staff crossing each other, is a silver-colored Guild Card that possesses the sublime radiance unique to Mythril.

In short, I've been given the privilege of skipping an adventurer Rank.

「Look, look! Lily is a Rank 5 adventurer too!」(Lily)

「I am now also Rank 5.」(Fiona)

Lily is excitedly showing me her new Guild Card, while the witch Fiona is

wearing her usual sleepy, uninterested expression. These two also received the『Adventurer Services Decoration.』

The two of them bravely came to the aid of Iskia Village, which was on the verge of falling to the monster army's fierce attack, turning the tables in the blink of an eye. Apparently the only work that the Knights' Order of Spada had to do when they arrived was cleaning up the remaining monsters.

Gustav, the red Orc adventurer that I spoke to briefly in Iskia Village, was also awarded the『Adventurer Services Decoration.』Just as Nell told me, his party, the『Iron Demon Brigade』, are famous in Spada and their actions in this battle were treated as something that was to be expected of them. Since they already reached Rank 5 a long time ago, we're the only ones that were granted the privilege of skipping a Rank.

Oh yeah, speaking of Nell, she was supposed to receive the『Adventurer Services Decoration』as well, but...

Anyway, the ones who performed meritorious deeds in Iskia have been awarded magnificent decorations like this.

Nevertheless, as I acted solo and played a conspicuous role, I'm the only one who was awarded the『Crown Medal.』Since quite a lot of the rescued students are high-class people such as noblemen's children who are training as cadets, that probably contributed to how well my actions were received.

Anyway, our actions have earned us Mythril plates and the『Element Masters』have finally been acknowledged as a Rank 5 party.

However, for some reason, the class name engraved on my Guild Card is『Nightmare Berserker.』

That's strange; my class should definitely have been recorded as『Black Magic user.』It shouldn't have changed since I had it recorded by Nyarko in Irz Village.

Damn it, those damn people at the Adventurers' Guild, tampering with people's personal information as they like... now this embarrassing class name has become official, hasn't it?

「Well, Ranking-up was one of our objectives, so that's good. I didn't think we'd become Rank 5 so quickly, though.」

「That reminds me, we apparently set the record for the fastest Ranking-up in Spada's history.」

Fiona informs me of this in a cold tone, as if she's not particularly happy about this.

「Is that so? What about Wing Road?」

「It took them half a year. The Element Masters party was formally registered when we came to Spada, so if we count from that day, let's see, it is about three months.」

If I recall, I registered the『Element Masters』party with Erina at the academy district branch of the Adventurers' Guild around the middle of the Month of First Flame (Hatsubi). Right after we registered, I went to hunt Punpuns and Goblins, Lily went to hunt Slimes and Fiona went to hunt Dagger Raptors and Windwolves. Uwah, how nostalgic...

And so time passed, and now it's the 6th of the Month of Blue Moon (Sougetsu). Mhmm, it's been about three and a half months, I suppose. If Wing Road took half a year then that means we Ranked-up at double their speed.

「We skipped a Rank, so we were just lucky, right?」

「No, it is because of our ability as well as luck. And the Rank-skipping system is not that much of a special event. It is only appropriate to acknowledge capable adventurers.」

Come to think of it, I remember hearing in one of Nyarko's lectures that when people like knights who have certain backgrounds register as adventurers, they start off at Rank 3 right after passing the examination.

That means that skipping a Rank is actually something that we can be really proud of. Considering that we were even awarded these decorations, being humble about it might be seen as sarcasm instead.

「But to follow up on the ceremony with an extravagant party, they really don't know how to relax, do they...」

I somehow made it through the ceremony without making some kind of mistake in front of the king, but apparently a congratulatory party was planned

as well. That is to say, it's already started.

We've moved from the throne room to the castle's banquet hall. Since this room was made for these kinds of events, it's also decorated resplendently.

Being held in a place like this, it's more like castle ball that you might see in a fairy tale than a party.

There are real chandeliers hanging down from the ceiling that's so high that I have to look up to see it. The light that brightly illuminates each corner of this hall might have some kind of magic behind it.

This hall, which is larger than the throne room, is crowded with the students that were rescued at Iskia Fortress, as well as their relatives and other academy students that are here to celebrate their safety. It's quite a lot of people; the banquet hall can barely fit them all in here.

I can see them everywhere, enjoying the food and drinks that have been laid out on the long, spacious tables while rejoicing in the students' safety and telling tales of heroism from the events of Iskia.

Hey, the one speaking fervently with a bottle of alcohol in one hand is the Orc teacher that I knocked out with a wooden sword, isn't it? I heard the teachers suffered many casualties and that more than half of those who were seriously injured are teachers, but damn are they tenacious.

Of course, Simon, who wasn't seriously wounded but is recuperating in his own home nonetheless, isn't here. I'll have to find an opportunity to visit him sometime.

Come to think of it, I don't see Will here, either. He was among the students attending the ceremony, so I thought he'd be at this party. Well, it's really packed in here and everyone's in uniform, so it's pretty difficult for us to spot each other.

「Still, you two don't get nervous even in an atmosphere like this, do you?」

「Eh, are you nervous, Kurono-san?」

「Kurono, are you okay~?」

「I'm fine, it's just my first time experiencing something like this, you see.」

It's not as bad as during the ceremony, but I really can't feel calm. I pat Lily's head, partially in an attempt to conceal my nervousness. Her silky blonde hair is incredibly comforting to touch. It heals me.

「Haah, that is how it is, is it? I am simply happy that I can eat so many delicious things.」

「That's good for you.」

「Yes, I am thinking of beginning my second round.」

「That's... good for you...」

Before the three of us isolated ourselves in this corner of the banquet hall and started chatting, Fiona got ahead of everyone and searched through the food that had been prepared. She got an extra-large serving for herself, so I'd thought she would be satisfied with that, but to think that it would only be the preliminary battle. I wonder how many rounds she's going to go for. And will she have a separate stomach for dessert?

「Now that I think about it, I haven't eaten much yet. Do you want to eat together, Lily?」

「Yeah, I'll eat! I'll make you say "aa~ah!"」

「Well then, I think I'll do the same to you, Lily.」

Having this silly-sounding conversation, we follow Fiona's lead to the tables that have food spread out across them.

And once again, this phenomenon occurs where the students clamor and move aside for us, as if I'm Moses parting the sea.

I say "once again" because after we were awarded these decorations and made the main part of the event, so to speak, nobody dared approach us. The students have been reacting to us in this exact way ever since.

「It is convenient that they are making way for us, isn't it, Kurono-san?」

Is that the extent of your impression of this, Fiona-san? It's actually considerably shocking to me.

I can't help but think that they're scared of us, no, scared of me.

As I cautiously observe a little, I see that Lily and Fiona are receiving a lot of hints and looks from people that clearly want to get to know them, but all I can see in the glances towards me is,「Uwah, that person is scary.」

Damn it, that's how everyone looks at me even after I'm awarded with those decorations? I'm an idiot for holding onto the hope that people might have gotten better impressions of me after my actions in Iskia.

「Well, there's no helping it...」

As I whisper quietly to myself in resignation, since I'm the Nightmare Berserker, after all –

「Yo, hero of Iskia.」

At the end of the path to the table that has been opened for us is a man with black hair and red eyes, wearing the glorious red cape that shows that he's a cadet. Nero Julius Elroad.

The swordsman Kai and the Necromancer Safiel are standing on either side of him. Nell and Charlotte aren't there.

I'm particularly intrigued by Nell's absence.

I haven't seen her since we parted on the walls of Iskia Fortress when I went to meet up with Lily and Fiona.

Apparently she collapsed from fatigue, but because of the circumstances and our social positions, I couldn't go to see her. She was isolated in a carriage prepared by the Knights' Order on the way back from Iskia, and she was still like that even during the parade.

Never mind visiting her; right now, I don't even have any detailed information on what's happening with her. She didn't attend the ceremony, either, and the reason given for that was because she is in poor health.

But Nero, her older brother, should definitely know about her current condition. I want to take this opportunity to ask him, but no matter how I look at it, it seems that this prince is really angry, doesn't it...

Chapter 353

「Nell, how are you feeling?」

「I'm... fine...」

Nero is not simple-minded enough to believe this reply.

The room is clean and neatly arranged; it is an exemplar of what the room of a dedicated student should look like. Nell's body is laid out across the simple, Spadan-made bed.

This is the female cadets' dormitory of the Royal Spada Academy. In other words, this is where Nell resides while she is studying in Spada.

Males are normally prohibited from entering these dormitories, but there is an exception for those paying visits to the ill, so that is why Nero is here. Of course, there are restrictions on who can visit and for how long.

Indeed, Nero is visiting his sister who suddenly collapsed shortly before their return from Iskia Fortress.

「Don't push yourself and take your time to rest.」

「Yes, Onii-sama...」

「Look, I bought you the『Sweet Smile』pudding that you like. I'll leave it in the cooler, so eat it whenever you want.」

「... Thank you.」

Are his words really reaching his sister? Nero is doubtful and anxious.

What kind of despair could have turned Nell's normally beautiful, clear-sky-blue eyes into this dark, stagnant, hollow color?

To make matters worse, it seems that she is suffering from sleep deprivation because she is having nightmares. There are distinct shadows below her eyes; she shows clear signs that she is mentally suffering.

Her face is pale, as if all of the blood has been drained from it, and her graceful black hair somehow seems to have lost its shine.

Even so, Nell's beautiful face remains unchanged. However, this beauty is the kind that bestows anxiety to those who look upon it, as if it were a brittle, fleeting beauty that would shatter if touched. It is not her true beauty, the one that is pure, clean and sweet.

Nero averts his gaze, as if he can no longer stand looking at this pitiful sight. He sees a textbook on magic lying open on her desk; it is unusual for Nell to have left it like that. With one glance at the magic circle drawn on the page, he can tell that it is a page that describes the『Force Boost』spell.

Nell had probably been studying hard on her own even in the absence of her party members. Seeing a flaw in her usual hard-working appearance, Nero's mood became even worse.

Why is his younger sister, who is normally brave and always does her best, in this state?

No, he already has an idea of who the culprit is.

「... Nell, what happened with that man, Kurono?」

「I-it has nothing to do with Kurono-kun!」

Nell, who was behaving like a seriously ill person up until now, suddenly raises her voice. Her response is very abnormal, as if her entire personality changed, but Nero was expecting a response like this.

However, he is unable to conceal the disturbance in his heart caused by witnessing this for the second time.

But even though Nero frowns and wears a facial expression that could clearly be described as displeasure or even heartbroken, Nell is not in a state to take notice of it right now.

「It is not Kurono-kun's fault... I'm, I'm...」

The sight of Nell repeatedly whispering words that make no sense could be considered unusual. But this is actually an improvement.

Nell collapsed when the three other Wing Road members had returned to Iskia Fortress and they were preparing to return to Spada. To be more accurate, she had already collapsed by that time.

Nero suddenly realized that he hadn't seen his younger sister so he went to look for her and discovered her lying on top of the broken fortress walls.

He could see that she had been vomiting, but fortunately he was able to tell that she had simply lost consciousness. The Knights' Order of Spada had already reached the fortress, and she was able to be examined immediately by a Priest.

It seemed likely that Nell's symptoms were caused by running out of mana from casting『Radiance Exile』, the battle that came after that as well as pushing herself to continue using healing magic on the students during the aftermath. In fact, the Priest from the Knights' Order gave that diagnosis.

However, when Nell first opened her eyes, it became clear that Nell had collapsed not from running out of mana, but because of some emotional shock.

The first thing she did when she woke up was cry. She showed no restraint despite the eyes of the people around her, crying as loudly as if she had reverted to being the crybaby that she used to be as a child.

Even when her brother Nero and best friend Charlotte asked her for the reason, Nell kept her mouth shut stubbornly. Once they thought that her crying had stopped and she had finally calmed down, she became incredibly depressed and didn't speak a word. And then she would burst into tears again at irregular intervals.

Exposing Nell to the public in this state would not be good for her, not as a princess or as a young woman. Having her participate in the return parade was out of the question. The official reason for Nell having her own special carriage during the journey from Iskia to Spada was,『She is weak from using too much mana so she is receiving special transport for her safety』, but the real reason was her emotional instability.

And now, Nell is resting in her own room in the women's dormitories. Around the time Nell returned to her room, she had finally stopped crying and she seemed to have calmed down for the most part.

Until Nero spoke Kurono's name.

『Kuh, u, uu... Kurono-kun...』

『Sorry, Nell. It's fine, everything's alright now, so just stay quiet and sleep.』

Seeing the large teardrops of his younger sister spilling over her heartbroken face, there is no need for Nero to pursue the topic any further.

Nero somehow manages to calm Nell down. As he watches her close her eyes quietly once more, he feels certain of one thing.

「... It's your fault, is it? Kurono.」

That man is the main cause of his younger sister's insanity.

Murderous intent rises endlessly from the depths of his heart. He normally shows no interest in anyone, good or bad. Has he ever felt this much hatred for someone before?

No, that is impossible. Only wild monsters would dare try to lay a hand on anything that Nero considers precious.

But as difficult as it is to believe, right now, there is a person who is guilty of doing something that has driven his younger sister, the First Princess of Avalon, mad.

Kurono. Just when did this man get close to, no, lay a hand on Nero's adorable younger sister, the most precious person in the world?

This is the first time that Nell has added「-kun」to a man's name. Even when talking to Kai, her party member, she uses「-san.」This fact alone is enough to indicate that she has opened her heart to Kurono in a way that no other man can compare to.

No other man, not even her older brother, Nero himself.

「No! Let go, let go of me! Kurono-kun is —」

When she came out onto the battlefield, even with the Greed-Gore before her, Nell could see nothing but Kurono. She took no notice of her brother Nero, shouting,「Let go!」as if he was nothing but a hindrance. She is likely still unaware that Nero was the one who stopped her, blocked the Greed-Gore's breath and escaped while carrying her.

She was just like an amateur adventurer in her first battle with panic-induced tunnel-vision. Just what kind of joke would it be for a Rank 5 adventurer to be doing such an unsightly thing?

No, Nero would never speak ill of his sister. Even though her healing magic is her only redeeming feature, even though her sense of direction is useless and her cooking tastes horrible.

Therefore, he directs all of his hatred towards Kurono. He wishes for nothing more than to cut that man down right now with his trusty sword –

Nero requires more than a little time and determination to suppress these violent emotions.

Even if he ignores Nell's problems, there are several things about that man that he is curious about.

The first thing that surprised him was the strength Kurono used to eventually defeat the Greed-Gore.

Kurono used the wound in the Greed-Gore's neck created by Nero's『Lone Flash』to deal the fatal blow, but Nero isn't arrogant enough to say that he did all the work just from that fact. No matter how much he hates Kurono, as an adventurer – no, as a man – he has no choice but to acknowledge the prowess that Kurono possesses in battle.

Yes, that man possesses power enough to rival Nero's own. If they were to have a one-on-one duel, it would be difficult for Nero to emerge victorious unharmed. He would have to be prepared to lose at least one arm.

The appearance of such a powerful adventurer is something that the people of Spada should be happy about.

But Nero has a bad feeling about this.

He did a little investigation on Kurono and his party,『Element Masters』, shortly after the incident in the dining hall. With the incredible speed at which they were climbing the Ranks, Nero had thought that it would not be strange if this was the party responsible for cutting off the Wrath-Pun's right arm. But in reality, this party exceeded those expectations.

That is why he feels uneasy. Why has a man hiding that much power suddenly appeared in Spada?

If he wanted fame as an adventurer, it wouldn't have been strange for him to

have started working earlier. Even if he didn't want to for some reason, there were surely quests that would have let him gain attention much more quickly.

There were plenty of options. Despite that, Kurono and his party enrolled in the academy's adventurer course and lived a carefree student life.

Does he simply want to live a quiet, peaceful life without using his power or gaining attention? It wasn't as if Nero couldn't understand why he would want that. As he feels considerable dissatisfaction with the negative attention that he gets as a royal family member, such a lifestyle seems ideal to him.

However, he is sure that the man named Kurono who emits that ominous presence is not such a peaceful person.

The worst possible scenario runs through Nero's mind.

「Setting up a foundation... is he?」

Kurono hasn't come to the academy for fun. What if he came here to get closer to the Second Prince of Spada, Wilhart?

Even if he is the Delusional Prince that is not highly thought of by the people, a prince is still a prince. He is unmistakably the son of the sword-king Leonhart.

If Kurono's aim is to have someone as influential as a royal family member in the palm of his hand, just what kind of ambition is he hiding?

That would make for a story of rebellion, like the legend of the Demon King and stories of heroes. However, Kurono's actions have produced results that cannot be laughed off as absurd fiction or wild delusions.

Wilhart already possesses absolute trust in Kurono, calling him things like "sworn friend of my soul" and "Nightmare Berserker".

And now, the First Princess of Avalon, Nell Julius Elroad – as the flames of hatred rise from the pit of his stomach a second time, Nero realizes something.

No, Nell isn't the only one. The same applies to himself.

「Fiona is... I see... how it is...」

The beautiful woman he met in the great library, Fiona Soleil. Nero was indeed drawn to her beautiful face – no, her feigned distant behavior despite

the fact that he was in front of her. Enough for him to want to stand up Safiel and accompany her instead. But what if that encounter was all a trap?

The first time he came into contact with her was that day that he saved her when two cadets were hitting on her in the plaza. If that was some kind of trap set up for him... It isn't an implausible theory.

Because Fiona is – Kurono's woman.

The scene that he saw before he found Nell collapsed on top of the fortress walls, where Kurono and Fiona were embracing each other in an emotional reunion, has already been burned into his red eyes.

He had pushed that scene into the corner of his memory up until now because he has been thinking of nothing but Nell, but looking back on it again, it is quite shocking.

Perhaps because he was born in the royal family, he had considerable confidence in his ability to see people's true natures. He thought that Fiona was the type of person with no interest in members of the opposite sex – to the point that he suspected that she might be homosexual.

As he warns himself not to rely too much on his insight again, he feels admiration for Fiona's acting ability. If he hadn't clearly seen the relationship between her and Kurono himself, he would likely... have at least become friends with her. That is how much of a good impression he had of her.

Kurono has been enticing Spada's Second Prince, Avalon's First Prince and the First Princess. No, that isn't all; if Nero had become close with Fiona, Kurono would have been able to interact with the other Wing Road members as well.

Lily, the third member of the Element Masters, is already mysteriously gaining popularity at the academy as the「Happy Fairy-san.」Even the cadets have been talking about her. In other words, the young noblemen who represent the future generation are willingly approaching her.

And that only further allows Kurono to extend his evil influence towards the academy students.

The school that children of noblemen and royalty attend is a place for them to create connections with others for the future. In that regard, Kurono is building

incredible relationships with people in a way that regular noblemen could only dream of.

And on top of that, with this incident, finally – he will be awarded a decoration.

Kurono will likely receive not only the Adventurer Services Decoration, but also the Crown Medal. Lily and Fiona, who saved Iskia Village, will both receive the Adventurer Services Decoration as well and all of them will suddenly rise up onto Spada's main stage.

This isn't a situation where anyone would worry about trivial matters like the fact that they have broken Wing Road's record for being the party to Rank-up the fastest or the fact that they have performed great deeds at Iskia.

On top of building strong connections within Spada, they would rise as the heroes who saved Iskia from a Rank 5 monster.

Everything is going too well, as if destiny is guiding the – no, this is what Kurono was aiming for. Everything has gone according to that man's plan.

「Kurono... Just what are you planning...?」

The muscles of Nero's back shudder. He wants to deny that all of this is possible, but with these circumstances, he cannot let his guard down.

He must pay utmost attention to that man's movement.

If Kurono's hidden ambitions are as evil as the appearance of his face – the one who will stop it, no, the only one who can stop it, is Nero.

「Nnh... Kurono... kun...」

Hearing the sweet sound of his sister's voice as she talks in her sleep, Nero's attention comes back to reality.

Nero clicks his tongue as he realizes that Kurono is playing with her heart, even in her dreams.

「... I guess it's about time.」

He becomes aware of the setting sun shining through the large window, filling the room with orange light. It seems that Nell is sleeping peacefully, letting out

small, quiet breaths.

「See you, Nell. I'll visit you again after I go and talk to that guy tomorrow.」

What happened between Kurono and Nell? What transpired for that man to be in such a relationship with Nero's sister that he would bring her to Iskia Fortress? The very first thing that Nero needs to do is interrogate Kurono and find out the truth and his real intentions.

Even if Nero has to kill Kurono with his own hands, he has to at least ask Kurono these things.

Perhaps the words that come out of that man's mouth will be not convenient excuses, but the confession of a terrible truth. Preparing himself with the determination to hear this, Nero puts Nell's room behind him.

Note from the author: The terrible truth that could come from Kurono's mouth would be... Kurono:「About your sister, I ate her* (homemade cooking) the day I met her. After that, I brought her to my room every day and taught her various things (about cooking).」 Something like that, I suppose.

TLN*: 食う/kuu means "to eat" in most contexts. "To eat a woman" has a sexual connotation in English as well, but in Japanese it can be a vulgar term that means "to have sex with a woman", commonly used when it's the woman's first time.

Chapter 355

Despite the incident of Nero's outburst, drunkenness has spread throughout the banquet hall and everyone is enjoying the party.

I'm glad that this celebratory event wasn't destroyed.

Such a thought runs through my head as I stand on the balcony, cooling myself off with the evening wind. The Month of Blue Moon (Sougetsu) would be equivalent to October in Japan, but the air doesn't contain the piercing cold of an autumn breeze just yet.

The banquet is only on the first floor of the castle, so it's not like I get a great view of Spada at night by coming out onto the balcony. If it were daytime, I'd at least be able to see the beautifully-arranged garden, but it's already quite late at night and darkness has settled in.

As I turn from the dull, black scenery towards the bright banquet hall, I hear happy laughter and a pleasant melody. I see the excited students enjoying themselves.

The one playing the music is Will, of all people. It's a guitar. Well, it might not technically be a guitar, but that's what the automatic translation is telling me. With this instrument that both looks and sounds like a guitar, Will puts on a masterful performance despite his drunken state.

「FAAHAHAHA! Music is an art of noblemen and royalty. I had no talent for combat, but my talent with a musical instrument is as you can see, what do you think? It is quite impressive, is it not? Sharl was so unskilled in music that she would cry and smash the guitar!」(Wilhart)

As Will tells a revealing story about his little sister's rock-concert like performance, I feel considerable surprise at discovering Will's unexpected talent.

But music is an「art of noblemen and royalty」as Will says, and there are apparently quite a lot of people who learn how to play it. Spada has an image of being a military-focused nation, but it seems that its people are somewhat

proficient in the arts as well.

And as Will strums the guitar in a good mood, Lily dances in a cute way to the rhythm of the music.

Upon hearing the word “Fairy”, one might think of a singing, dancing idol, and it seems that Lily is able to dance magnificently by instinct just like an idol. Well, in her little girl form, her dance only induces the pleasure of seeing a kindergarten-age child playing – or so one would expect, but she is giving a dynamic performance with her unexpectedly quick movements and three consecutive triple-axel jumps. Well, she’s cute, so everything is okay no matter what she does.

Incidentally, Fiona is dancing together with Lily. She is dancing in a curious way with her usual sleepy expression. The way she dances is profoundly mysterious and hard to describe in words; it almost makes me want to ask if it’s some kind of witch’s ritual.

Lily is cute, but if I was asked what I thought of Fiona’s dancing, hmm, how should I put it... It’s her own unique dance. Yes, let’s go with that.

In any case, now that I, a source of fear, have put some distance between myself and the banquet, an incredible number of people have crowded around the two of them. Lily was already popular around the academy, and Fiona, well, it would be good if she took this opportunity to make some new friends.

If Fiona were to have some kind of wonderful encounter that could restore the color to her gray academy life, that would be great. Well, I’ve only made two friends since coming to Spada, so I can’t really say much myself.

「Have you been able to enjoy the party?」(Mysterious person)

As I space out, someone unexpectedly speaks to me.

I thought nobody would come near the balcony because I’m here, but, well, considering the tone of speech, it’s clearly not a student.

Then just who would – my question is immediately answered as I turn around.

「Your Majesty, King Leonhart...」(Kurono)

The one standing there is a giant who somehow seems like a red lion. It is

undoubtedly the king who awarded me the decoration this afternoon. He is wearing the black military uniform of Spada's army rather than his flashy red cape, but there's no mistaking the identity of someone with such a conspicuous appearance.

W-what is he doing in a place like this? Actually, is it alright for him to be here without an escort or something? These questions swirl around inside my head.

「Be at ease; I do not care for formality.」(Leonhart)

I almost stood to attention without thinking, but hearing these words, I relax a little. Though it doesn't change the fact that I'm nervous.

「Thank you very much. The party was very lively and enjoyable.」(Kurono)

「I see.」(Leonhart)

With that, time passes on in silence. The pleasant music and singing coming from the banquet hall seem incredibly distant. My nervousness increases.

Unlike Will, I suppose King Leonhart is the reserved type. This silence is a little, no, considerably painful. Should I be the one to bring up a conversation topic...?

「I wanted to thank you personally.」(Leonhart)

As if sensing my distress, the red king opens his mouth.

「Oh no, being honored with the decorations was more than enough gratitude for me to receive.」(Kurono)

「That was my thanks as the king of Spada. Right now, I wish to thank you as a father. Thank you for saving my son.」(Leonhart)

「Y-you're welcome...」(Kurono)

With the astonishing sight of the king of a nation lowering his head before me, I'm only capable of this extremely plain response. Even though I'm a Japanese person ignorant of the class system here, I do understand that the king lowering his head to me is kind of amazing.

My feelings of worry that someone might see this scene and make a big fuss about it come before my happiness at receiving his gratitude.

But fortunately, I don't hear any sudden screams during the time that it takes for King Leonhart to raise his head again. I'm happy that I haven't created any more strange rumors about myself.

「You and your party will be paid a suitable reward by myself and the Adventurers' Guild, but again, this is but an interaction made for the public. As my own personal thanks, I want to grant you one wish. Do you have such a wish to be granted?」(Leonhart)

I'm even further taken aback by this sudden offer. But though he says that he'll grant me one wish, it's only sensible to assume that it has to be within the realm of possibility. Even so, having the king of a nation do me a favor is a great chance that most people normally don't have.

I almost reflexively give a response like,「Your feelings alone are enough.」 Well, he really doesn't need to go so far, but... I won't simply be continuing this lifestyle as an adventurer.

I wonder if I should make a wish.

Should I have him knight me? Ask for a powerful cursed weapon? Or an Artifact? If I ask for it, he might even give me land and a mansion. Even simply asking for an increased monetary reward would be reasonable as an adventurer.

No, these are all wrong. I have something that I need much more than these.

Alright, I've decided. My wish is –

TLN: In the following section, both characters speak in really old-school, honorific language. I've done my best to express that in English but a lot of the nuances are unfortunately lost in translation. There are a number of uncommon pronouns used here as well that are usually honorific terms used in older settings, but I've left them in English for readability. In case you're curious, here are the terms:

Father = 父上/Chichi-ue

Mother = 母上/Haha-ue

Older brother = 兄上/Ani-ue

The room is one of the castle's private rooms for royal use, though its interior is quite ordinary compared to the banquet hall.

Right now, there is a parent and child of Spada's royal family in here.

「So what did Kurono wish for?」(Wilhart)

One of them is Wilhart, Spada's Second Prince. The banquet has already come to an end and he has presumably consumed a considerable amount of alcohol, but his clear manner of speech shows no sign of drunkenness.

The golden eye behind a newly-worn monocle has an incredibly intellectual-looking shine to it.

「He said he wants information on the Crusaders.」(Leonhart)

The one answering him is Wilhart's father, Leonhart, king of Spada.

As he sits down on the black Bluehorn-hide sofa, a heavy presence drifts from his figure. His physique looks even more magnificent than usual because of the contrast with the person sitting opposite him, the slender-bodied Wilhart.

「Hmm, that Kurono, being so reserved. If he had asked me, I could have offered him any number of things...」(Wilhart)

「Will, you are still a student. Try not to pry into the nation's secrets too much.」(Leonhart)

「Oops, that was a slip of the tongue.」(Wilhart)

Leonhart slightly regrets assigning him an escort maid who was originally an Assassin of the intelligence department.

However, though Leonhart would never tell Wilhart this directly, there are several matters that require information analysis that he wishes he could just leave to Wilhart. He, his wife and Aisenhart, who is set to become the next king, are all inept at this kind of mental work. To be more precise, they are constantly at their wits' end.

If he were to be completely honest, he would admit that he seriously wishes that Wilhart would graduate quickly and become his secretary.

「Still, I did write you a letter earlier. What do you think about the threat

posed by the Crusaders, Father?」(Wilhart)

「Do not worry, I am not taking them lightly. Most importantly, I saw the white being who possessed the power to defeat Garvinal when I visited the Galahad region.」(Leonhart)

「Hmm, that is possibly one of those known as the『Apostles』, the Crusaders' most powerful warriors.」(Wilhart)

「Apostles?」(Leonhart)

As Leonhart repeats the word, he feels a little frustrated that his son seems more knowledgeable about the Crusaders than him. He warned Wilhart not to pry into the nation's secrets too much only a few moments earlier, but this is how things are.

「It is said that they are the twelve warriors chosen to receive a divine protection much more fearsome than those of Ark's gods, the divine protection of a god that is known only as the White God. They apparently possess power that far surpasses that of Kurono, who repelled the Wrath-Pun and defeated the Greed-Gore.」(Wilhart)

「... Hooh.」(Leonhart)

「Father, please stop releasing your desire for battle in a place like this.」(Wilhart)

「My apologies.」(Leonhart)

As a swordsman, Leonhart cannot help but to feel raging emotions upon hearing of a powerful adversary. As such, he is unfortunately warned by his son to mind the time and place for such things.

「Surely you have not challenged Kurono to a duel or anything of the sort, have you?」(Wilhart)

「Will, you would doubt your father?」(Leonhart)

「Though Mother and Brother may be unaware that you discreetly challenge those you award decorations to for their achievements in battle, I, Wilhart, know of this. Did you not indirectly say that you might challenge Kurono to a contest of strength when there is an opportunity?」(Wilhart)

How sad it is for the king of Spada to be doubted this much by his own son... But as what Wilhart is pointing out is true, Leonhart has nothing to say in response.

Will speaks in an exasperated tone as he says that he will tell Kurono,「Pay no heed to the king's words」and warns Leonhart that he should restrain himself from now on. And then the conversation returns to the original topic.

「— But it is reassuring to hear about measures to deal with the Crusaders directly from you, Father. It seems that dispatching the『Rampage』General Gezenbool and gathering airborne troops at Galahad Fortress was not just for show.」(Wilhart)

「... Why are you so well-informed about all of this?」(Leonhart)

「I merely happened to overhear some things.」(Wilhart)

Seeing his son grinning broadly, Leonhart feels defeated as he runs his fingers through his wavy red hair.

「Even if that is not the case, if we consider that no Pegasuses, Dragons or Griffons came flying to Iskia Fortress, we can conclude that they were made to stay gathered at Galahad.」(Wilhart)

「That was unfortunate. If even one of those forces were mobilized, there could have been immediate reinforcements.」(Leonhart)

Which would have been faster, delivering news of an urgent mission to the airborne knights in Galahad or waiting for the forces that departed immediately for the frontlines from Spada?

Taking into account various things such as the relaying of information, the distance and preparations, the correct answer is without a doubt that the forces led directly by Leonhart from Spada would have been faster.

However, either way, the fortress would have fallen if it hadn't been for Kurono's actions. It does not change the fact that the reinforcements would have been too late.

「It is a thing of the past. Your judgment was not incorrect, Father. Even us academy students are not mere children. Everyone fought well, and as a result,

we held through the monsters' attack.」(Wilhart)

「Indeed, you did very well.」(Leonhart)

Indeed, they did well, to the point that Leonhart uncharacteristically thinks to himself that Spada has a bright future. He himself would have been unable to endure such a battle to hold a fortress during the time he was a student.

He was an idiot back then, but more importantly, the cadets were useless. They were the typical incompetent, blockheaded noble children.

The country of Spada has changed, and the academy has been changed by its current chairwoman, Sofia Sirius Parcifal. Thinking about how she has raised such reliable young people, Leonhart once again realizes that it was the correct decision to leave things in her hands.

「However, that does not mean that everything proceeded favorably. I knew that we would be able to hold the fortress until the day of rescue with the power of『Wing Road』, but at the last second, a reckless decision... As embarrassing as it is, truthfully speaking, I cannot help but to think of it as reckless.」(Wilhart)

The way Wilhart understands Wing Road's actions and still does not criticize them publicly is behavior that wouldn't be expected of a student. At this young age, Leonhart's son has already acquired a mind of steel that can endure humiliation.

Leonhart has not spoiled Wilhart, but nor does he remember raising him so harshly. Children are mysterious things.

「As a father, I must be thankful for the actions of Prince Nero. But as a king, I cannot praise them.」(Leonhart)

Leonhart has already heard about the events that transpired at Iskia Fortress.

At the last possible moment, with the monsters on the fortress's doorstep, 『Wing Road』left. Under other circumstances, this could even be interpreted as an act of desertion, but...

「If I were a student, I would have done the same thing as Prince Nero. I cannot criticize him too harshly.」(Leonhart)

No, there is no doubt that Leonhart would have been the one to sneak out of the castle to aim for enemy's general on his own. As a student, he felt no desire to protect other students; in fact, he thought that all of the cadets simply deserved to die. The circumstances were a little different back then, but that does not change the fact that he would have acted in a problematic way.

「Acting arbitrarily against orders... If they were knights, they would have been executed for that, but we are still students not bound by the steel of discipline. Thus, punishing them publicly would be impossible. Most importantly, Nero is a prince of Avalon; if Spada were to find fault with him, it would become a diplomatic issue.」(Wilhart)

Will's words are very much based on reality.

「If collective criticism for『Wing Road』came from the students, there would be problems caused by not punishing them as well, but... By lowering my head, I was able to divert the brunt of the students' dissatisfaction away from Wing Road. A small price to pay.」(Wilhart)

Leonhart is listening to the story of how Will showed an incredibly unsightly display, crying on his knees as Wing Road departed the fortress.

He played the fool to prevent the students' morale from vanishing and Wing Road from becoming villains. In fact, the students' morale was successfully preserved and they managed to hold the fortress until Kurono and Nell arrived as reinforcements.

However, at that moment when Will rubbed his forehead against the surface of the ground, was he kneeling with the knowledge that this would solve all of the potential problems in the future? If so, it is becoming difficult not to doubt whether he is truly Leonhart's son. No, he should be praised without reserve for this rather than doubted.

Indeed, if nobody else would praise Wilhart for this, Leonhart, as his father, should praise him personally.

「Will, your actions were correct, as a prince and as a general. The ability you admirably displayed to overcome that difficult situation, you should be proud of it.」(Leonhart)

「Thank you very much, Father. Those words alone are more than enough praise for this son of yours.」(Wilhart)

Wilhart's behavior is as formal as that of a retainer, but this is Leonhart's son's own way of hiding his embarrassment.

「In any case, the battle of Iskia has safely come to an end. The policy of being on maximum alert against the Crusaders must not be changed no matter what.」
(Wilhart)

To think that Wilhart would emphasize it to this extent. This only further confirms Leonhart's belief.

Wilhart, General Emelia and Kurono. All of the individuals who know about the Crusaders have strong feelings of danger regarding them. Such enemies are lurking far away, on the other side of Galahad.

A prediction that a difficult battle is coming passes through Leonhart's mind, one that would later prove to be true.

「Anyhow, Father, is it alright if we were to attend to the main issue at hand now? I feel pity for Sharl, keeping her waiting for so long.」(Wilhart)

「What are you trying to say...? Baka-aniki...」(Charlotte)

Up until now, the conversation has been between only the father and son, but there are in fact three people in this room. Leonhart's daughter, the somewhat pale-faced Third Princess Charlotte, glares at her older brother.

「Sharl, restrain yourself for now.」(Leonhart)

「Uu... I'm sorry, Otou-sama...」(Charlotte)

Charlotte is sitting right next to her father. Her body is already small to begin with, but next to Leonhart, she looks like a rabbit that has been captured by a lion. Charlotte is showing signs of fear, and it seems that fear is indeed what she is feeling.

「I have heard the rough details of what happened. Will's decision to defend the fortress was correct; first, you must understand that. And so, Sharl, I will allow you to speak. I will hear your excuse for leaving the fortress to try and defeat the Greed-Gore on your own.」(Leonhart)

When Leonhart arrived at Iskia Fortress with the Knights' Order, Charlotte was put under strict orders to stay at her father's side at all times. Even during the victory parade, she was not with her party, 『Wing Road』, but riding on her father's red Sleipnir behind him at the back of the parade.

It gave the image that Spada's newspapers wanted of a father rescuing his daughter, but this was certainly not done for the sake of giving a performance.

Leonhart, who has heard the details of the battle of Iskia, is angry. However, he has not yet punished his daughter for her actions.

Charlotte has been forced to wait in fear until this day, this moment, to receive her father's punishment that could come at any time. And now the time has come. It is finally here.

「I-I... wasn't...」(Charlotte)

With tears faintly appearing in the corners of her round, golden eyes, her lips tremble as she forces words to come out of her mouth.

「I wasn't wrong! If this baka-aniki had listened to me from the beginning, everything would have gone well! Wing Road would have been able to defeat the Greed-Gore! We wouldn't have suffered casualties in a pointless battle to defend the fortress!」(Charlotte)

With tears finally spilling down her cheeks, Charlotte declares her righteousness. Wilhart is wearing a dumbfounded expression, as if lost for words. On the other hand, Leonhart does not move even a single eyebrow; his face remains expressionless.

Leonhart understands. The reason Wilhart has opened his eyes wide in shock is certainly not because of his younger sister's foolishness.

「F-Father, Sharl is still inexperienced, so I humbly request that you forgive —」(Wilhart)

Sensing that his foolish sister has triggered their father's wrath, the older brother is desperately begging for her punishment to be made lighter. Both of them grew up in a Spadan family, so they know the fearsomeness of a father's anger.

「Sharl... You –」(Leonhart)

「Father?!」(Wilhart)

Wilhart steps forward to stop him, but it is too late. Leonhart remains seated, but has already raised an arm and clenched his hand into a fist.

「– UTTER FOOL!」(Leonhart)

With an angry roar that shakes the castle, the king swings his fist.

Though he has a human's body, the sword-king Leonhart possesses enough strength to rival the Dragon King. Even without a sword in his hand, the impact of his fist would be enough to crush a steel Golem.

The speed of the fist is not perceivable even for Charlotte, the one this terrifying destructive power is aimed at, let alone Wilhart who is watching from the side.

「Hyih... Ah...」(Charlotte)

A moment before the sword-king's fist touches Charlotte's adorable cheek, it suddenly stops.

Charlotte's pure-red hair is blown back in the wake of the force contained within the fist. Her long, trademark twin-tails flutter violently. The wind pressure created by the fist is terrifying.

「If you were a son, this fist would have hit you. Be grateful that you were born a girl.」(Leonhart)

The one letting out a sigh of relief with a hand on their chest is not Charlotte, but her older brother. Charlotte herself is staring into space with a dumbfounded expression, tears still spilling from her wide-open eyes.

「Sharl, Charlotte, it seems that there is a need to teach you the difference between confidence in your strength and overconfidence. But before that, you must be punished. You must atone for at least one ten-thousandth of the mistake that you made, with your own body.」(Leonhart)

「O-Otou-sama...」(Charlotte)

Charlotte bursts into loud tears. But the gaze in Leonhart's cold, golden eyes

is absolute proof that his decision will not waver, even with the tragic sight of his crying daughter before him.

「Will, return to your room. Even if Sharl calls for help, do not come in here to stop me under any circumstances. Tell this to Aik* as well.」(Leonhart)

TLN*: As a reminder, this is a nickname for Aisenhart.

「... Yes, Father.」(Wilhart)

There is no way for Wilhart to respond other than to acknowledge his father's words.

Being as intelligent as he is, Wilhart understands. He knows that his father is soft enough that he would loosen the hand of punishment if Wilhart were to enter and stop him.

What Leonhart is regretting most of all right now is not Charlotte's foolishness. He is regretting the naivety that allowed Charlotte to get away with all sorts of selfish behavior. It is not only his own naivety; everyone in the family has spoiled Charlotte too much.

The price for that is finally being paid by both the father and daughter's bodies.

And so, with an expression of sorrow, as if some bitter decision has been made, Wilhart leaves the room.

Just this one time, Charlotte gazes at the back of the older brother that she makes a fool of, as if desperately trying to cling onto him. Only the final remnants of her pride prevent the words,「Onii-chan, help me」from coming out of her mouth.

But Leonhart has already made his decision.

Charlotte has built up a twisted pride, mistaking overconfidence for confidence. Leonhart must break that pride with his own hands. He must break it into pieces.

「Sharl.」(Leonhart)

「Fuh, kuh, uu... yesh, Otou-sama...」(Charlotte)

「Undress.」(Leonhart)

「... Fueh?」(Charlotte)

Charlotte's pitiful, crying face freezes. She doesn't know what she has been asked to do; no, she simply doesn't want to know.

「I told you to undress. You are not a child anymore; you understand what the word means, do you not?」(Leonhart)

Leonhart has seen her body stiffen. But he has no intention of letting her get away.

「You are a woman; I will not strike your face. But I must punish you enough to make you regret being born as a woman.」(Leonhart)

「Th-that's... No way, Otou-sama... You can't be...」(Charlotte)

「I will not say it a third time. If you are going to pretend that you cannot hear me, I will tear your clothes off myself, even that splendid red cape.」(Leonhart)

Like a powerless girl in the hands of cruel men, Charlotte clutches herself with both arms as if trying to protect her small body that is trembling in fear.

Even with the pitiful sight of his beloved daughter in front of him, Leonhart has already steeled his resolve and is glaring at her like a beast with prey before its eyes.

How fortunate this situation would be for crueler men. Even if they conspired to capture Charlotte, she would simply mow such low-lives down with the lightning magic that she prides herself in.

However, the one assaulting her now is the sword-king Leonhart. There is not a single woman in Spada who would escape unharmed if he were to assault her in earnest.

Charlotte understands this well; she immediately realized that trying to resist or beg for mercy would be meaningless.

Her thin legs shake like those of a newborn fawn as she stands up from the sofa.

「I-I'll undress... I'll undress, so...」(Charlotte)

That is why she wants to at least be spared the experience of being forcefully stripped by having her Royal Spada Academy uniform and the red mantle that is proof that she is a cadet being torn to pieces. Her words sound heartbroken and devoid of dignity.

After a moment of silence, as if she has now killed her emotions, Charlotte puts her hands beneath her pleated skirt.

The tomboyish Charlotte flies, jumps around and kicks people in her everyday life, never mind the things that she does in battle. She is wearing short leggings so that her skirt rolling up does not cause her any problems. She takes those off first.

The glossy black fabric slides off the beautiful, white skin of Charlotte's legs.

Perhaps because these leggings protect her every day, she seems nervous after removing just this one piece of clothing.

However, she is about to experience a shame that this meagre embarrassment cannot compare to.

「Kuh, uu...」(Charlotte)

Leonhart waits in silence. He waits for his daughter to take off every single piece of her own clothing.

As more time passes in silence, Charlotte puts her hands beneath her skirt once more.

Her fingertips touch the white shorts made of Valhalla Silk. These are underwear of the highest-quality, worthy of being worn by royalty.

Charlotte lowers them forcefully as if shaking off her hesitation – or at least, she was supposed to, but she is still trembling and her face is completely red. As pathetic she looks, she lowers her underwear awkwardly over her thin, tightly-closed legs.

As the bright, pure-white shorts that don't have a single stain on them reach her knees, Leonhart takes his daughter's body in his strong arms as if he is unable to wait any longer.

「Kyah?! No, Otou-sama –」(Charlotte)

Charlotte lets out a high-pitched scream, but if that were enough to stop Leonhart, he wouldn't be doing this in the first place.

Leonhart sits on the sofa and pulls Charlotte, whose underwear has almost been completely removed, towards him. As if he will not accept even the slightest act of resistance, he forces her small body face-down on top of his knees and pins her down.

As Charlotte is thrust forward on top of Leonhart's knees, her short skirt flips up as if a gust of wind has blown against it, and her sweet, white bottom is exposed before Leonhart.

「N-no! No!」(Charlotte)

Leonhart is already restraining her with one hand. He has forced her arms behind her back and is holding onto her wrists, completely sealing her arms' movements.

No matter how much she struggles, it is pointless. Even if she were to release enough lightning to self-destruct, his grip would not loosen even a little.

Feeling the momentary struggles of the mage-class girl against his left hand, Leonhart slightly lifts his knee beneath her abdomen and forces her into a position where her bare bottom is raised into the air.

「No! No! No, no, no! I'm sorry, Otou-sama! Otou-sama!」(Charlotte)

Charlotte is finally crying and screaming for mercy. The sight of her inexperienced, smooth, pure-white bottom being raised up would stir up the sadistic desires of any man.

Leonhart moves to violate the soft skin of the trembling maiden, his own beloved pure, uncorrupted daughter, with his own hands.

「Reflect deeply upon your sins, Charlotte. I will spank you one hundred times.」(Leonhart)

「NOOOOO!」(Charlotte)

Note from the translator:

Due to the many lines of dialogue in this chapter, I decided to add character name in brackets after each dialogue line (As I am now doing for both of my

other series). This is probably going to be a permanent addition, so get used to it!

Anyway, Jesus Christ, this author likes to scare me. I legitimately thought I was translating a father-daughter rape scene for a good hour or so before I reached the end of the chapter. It didn't help that due to subject omission in Japanese sentences, I initially misinterpreted Charlotte being put on top of Leonhart's knees as her being forced onto her knees... Hope you guys enjoyed the chapter more than I did!

Yoshi

Chapter 354

「Yo, hero of Iskia.」

Nero is clearly angry for some reason. No, it's not like I don't have any idea why he might be angry at me.

「Not at all; if you hadn't come to save me, I would have died. Thank you very much, Prince Nero.」

「Stop. Stop it with that tone and that insincere flattery.」

Damn it, I tried my best to take a humble position, but I guess it didn't work.

This reminds me of the time when I met Nino in Irz Village; he also told me to stop it with the formal language because it annoyed him. I wonder if me using formal language is really that unpleasant.

But my feelings of “Prince Nero, thanks a bunch for saving me” aren't a lie.

My words might have come off as a sarcastic comment after receiving the decoration, even if I didn't mean it that way. I realize this only after I've said them, so it's too late, however.

「We're both students anyway. I don't mind if you call me by my first name. You do the same with Will, don't you?」

「Yeah.」

「And Nell as well.」

「... Yeah.」

As Nero spoke Nell's name, I felt a faint release of bloodthirst. It's clear that he didn't suggest that we use each other's first names so that we can be friendly with each other.

I surreptitiously send a hand signal to Lily and Fiona who have moved behind me, telling them to「hold back.」I'm sure the two of them have noticed Nero's unstable state. Actually, Lily might be performing a full-power telepathic scan of the prince's brain right now.

「You seem to have come to be on pretty good terms with Nell.」

「Nell is my friend.」

There's no point in trying to evade this topic. I've never been able manipulate conversations strategically. I'll be honest and just say what's on my mind.

If that's no good, well, I'll just release some black smoke, grab Lily and Fiona and make a swift escape. I don't care anymore.

「I see. I don't know how you approached her, but... Well, that's not important now. Say, Kurono, there are some things I want to ask you.」

The gaze of Nero's crimson eyes pierces straight through my own. It feels like he's about to challenge me to a duel rather than question me. Ah, damn it. As I suspected, that pretty white sword is hanging at the prince's waist.

Nero drawing his sword or me summoning my hatchet, I wonder which will be faster...

「The strength you used to defeat the Greed-Gore, what kind of divine protection was that?」

Uwah, he's asking something that's complicated and hard to answer!

I wouldn't mind giving an honest answer of, 「It's Mia-chan's」, but the Demon King's divine protection is something special that has never been bestowed on anyone before. I'm hesitant to simply declare its existence here. It hasn't been formally approved by the Pandora temple, either.

「I can't answer that. It's an adventurer's right to refrain from divulging his skills, isn't it?」

I preemptively add this excuse that I heard is apparently true.

「Well, I suppose you're right.」

Nero nods as if he was expecting my reply. As an active adventurer himself, he seems to understand.

I suppose he won't ask me anything more about my divine protection. Nero begins his next question.

「What was the meaning behind setting Fiona after me?」

「Huh?」

I can't help reacting like this. Anyone would respond in the same way after being asked a question that doesn't make any sense, after all.

Who set Fiona after who? I set her after Nero?

More importantly, Fiona, just when did you come to know the First Prince of Avalon? You went on and on about the dangers of getting close to members of the royal family, so what's the meaning of this?

She's right beside me, so it'll be faster just to ask her.

「Fiona, are you acquainted with Nero?」

「No, I have no recollection of him whatsoever. I suppose he has mistaken me for someone else.」

Fiona seems completely unperturbed; she replies with her usual sleepy-looking face.

Hey, hey, are you serious, haven't you just forgotten – is what I think, but as long as that's what she insists on, there's nothing I can do about it.

「... Apparently you've mistaken her for someone else.」

I face forward once more and deliver Fiona's reply to Nero.

As if he hasn't heard my reply, the gaze of Nero's red eyes that he inherited from Mia-chan is directed straight at Fiona, but then he quickly averts his gaze as if giving up. Of course, Fiona shows no reaction at all. Is she actually asleep?

「Tch, well, whatever... Questioning you now is pointless.」

I ended up giving him quite a joke-like answer, but for now, I'm glad that he's satisfied.

However, he prefaces his next question by telling me that he won't forgive me if I refuse to answer it.

This seems to be the final, most important question.

「– Why did you bring Nell to the fortress?」

The question that comes from Nero's mouth is one that I've been expecting

him to ask. Actually, I could only assume that he would definitely ask that question at some point.

And in response to that question, I have only one answer.

「Sorry.」

The moment I apologize, Nero's right hand moves.

He's drawing his sword – no, that tightly-clenched fist is thrown straight towards my face.

The only response I'm capable of is to close my eyes reflexively.

「!」

I feel the sensation of a solid fist striking my left cheek hard. Considering how thin Nero is, it's an incredibly heavy punch. He's even using『Force Boost?』

If I were a normal human, I would have been sent flying several meters. But because my body has been reinforced to be more sturdy, I was able to withstand it just by stepping back with my right foot and planting it firmly in the ground.

Even so, pain is pain. My cheekbone hasn't cracked, but the inside of my mouth might have been cut a bit.

「Kurono!」

「Kurono-san!」

I stop Lily and Fiona with a hand motion – that might not be enough, so I talk to Lily under the assumption that she's listening through telepathy. It's fine, Lily. Don't move, stay right where you are.

I hear Lily's immediate reply of,「But!」echoing in my head.

It's really fine. I've just taken a punch from Nero.

That's right, that one punch is the only one that I'm going to take quietly.

「– ?!」

In the next instant, Nero pursues me with his left fist, but I stop it with one hand.

The dry sound of his hand striking mine echoes loudly. His second punch is just as mercilessly powerful as his first.

「I asked Nell to lend me her strength. So as her older brother, you have the right to punch me for exposing her to danger.」

As if surprised that I stopped his second attack, Nero has a look of bewilderment on his face. I don't know if he'll be satisfied with my response or not, but I never intended to make him understand in the first place.

I'm just making something clear.

「But that was something that Nell herself wanted as well. She risked her life to save her older brother and her friends, her party members who were there. I couldn't go as far as to ignore her determination to do that. So I can't allow myself to be punched a second time.」

I release Nero's fist from my palm.

A third punch doesn't come. Instead, he glares at me with an even sharper glint in his eye.

「Don't talk like you understand everything! Nell is different from me; no matter what reason there might be, she shouldn't be exposed to danger!」

「Aren't you the one who doesn't understand?」

「What did you say...?」

It's not like I don't understand how Nero feels. If I were Nell's older brother, I would feel the same way without a doubt.

But I'm not her older brother; I'm her friend. That's why I'm the one who sympathized with her feelings the most.

「Nell is one of your party members as well, isn't she? Do you think being the only one to receive special treatment would make her happy?」

「Shut up...」

「Nell said it herself, that there was someone that she had to save. Even though she was that determined, would you seriously have been able to tell her not to come and help because it would be too dangerous?」

「I told you to shut up!」

Nero's right arm moves once more. This time, he grabs a hold of my collar and pulls me closer towards him. My shirt lets out a scream-like noise, as if it's about to be torn to pieces.

「I won't forgive anyone who exposes Nell to danger. That's why I'll never forgive you, Kurono, you bastard.」

Nero has finally stopped suppressing his bloodthirst; he's letting it out indiscriminately now.

As expected of a Rank 5 adventurer. Though only for a short while, I've seen his abilities during the battle with the Greed-Gore. I feel a powerful sensation that causes my skin to crawl. My sixth sense is warning me that things are getting dangerous.

It seems that Nero isn't the only one getting serious; there's Lily and Fiona behind me who have been holding themselves back up until now. They're barely managing to contain themselves for the moment, but I can vaguely sense that there's enough bloodthirst swirling around in here that it might explode at any second.

The two party members that Nero brought with him are exceptionally sharp as well. Likely in response to the unstable presence of Lily and Fiona, they're showing some indirect hostility, ready to immediately deal with any attack.

This is bad; it would be fine if this ended up as just a fight between me and Nero, but a brawl including the members of both our parties, a brawl between Rank 5 adventurers, would instantly turn the hall where this party is taking place into a scene straight from hell.

But my words are unlikely to reach Nero's ears now.

It's unfortunate that things have devolved into this explosive, dangerous situation, but I don't regret anything that I said to Nero.

I know how it feels to be unable to save those that are truly important. I know the depth of the regret that it causes.

That's why I absolutely support Nell's feelings of wanting to save her friends.

There are times when you have to fight, even if you have to expose yourself to danger in the process. That's especially true for someone who possess the ability of a Rank 5 adventurer.

That's why I won't apologize to Nero or take back my words.

Even so, as an older brother, he's correct to prioritize his sister's safety above all else. Nero, your anger isn't unjustified.

However, that doesn't mean that we can express our inability to reach an agreement through our fists in a place like this.

「Listen, because of you, right now, Nell is –」

Nero's hostility has already hit some kind of limit.

Right, I have no choice but to free myself from Nero's grip, release『Black Smoke』and make an escape. The moment I come to this decision –

The sound of something being destroyed in a spectacular fashion echoes throughout the banquet hall.

What's happening?! Both Nero and I reflexively turn towards the source of the noise. Actually, in this situation, there's nobody here who can't see it.

In the spot where the attention of the entire banquet hall is gathered, there's male student wearing the same the same red cape as Nero. He's not standing, but collapsed on the ground.

A red liquid is spreading across the hard marble floor. I can immediately tell by the liquid's hue and the rich fragrance reaching my nose that it's the local Spadan-made wine, not blood.

The remains of a half-broken bottle are mixed among the spilled wine. It seems that this is the source of the noise.

「FAAHAHAHA! My apologies, it seems that I have become a little too festive and drunk a little more than I perhaps should haaave.」

The student who fell onto the ground together with his bottle of wine is speaking in a strangely inarticulate tone. Now that he has gotten to his feet from his original face-down position, it's clear who he is. No, his previous words were more than enough to give away his identity.

「O-oi, Will... are you alright?」

I'm still in the middle of having my collar grabbed, but I can't help saying these words to my drunken friend.

「Whaaat are you saying! I am the immortal Second Prince who made a miraculous return from the hell that was Iskia! Falling over just a liiittle will not do me any haaarm! FAAHAHAHA!」

Will, who seems to have completely recovered, places both his hands on his hips and lets out a somewhat proud-sounding laugh. Maybe he's gone crazy from hitting his head somewhere when he fell down. No, he's like this even when sober, so I suppose he's fine.

「Oops, broken shards of glass have scattered around, how dangerous! Good lord, who is the fool that put my bottle of special Spadan wine to waste?! Oooi, Seria, hurry up and clean this mess up for me.」

「Certainly, Will-sama.」

Before I know it, the escort-maid Seria appears behind Will, equipped with a cleaning set consisting of a bucket, a broom and a dustpan. Even though she's wearing such a conspicuous maid uniform, I had no idea she was there until just now. She's completely invisible, like Su-san during battle.

Anyway, behind the maid who has begun cleaning the bottle up on her master's orders, Will takes some extremely unstable steps towards us.

「Fuoh, if it isn't my childhood friend who acts as Sharl's caretaker, the Lightning Lord Knight, Nero Julius Elroad!」

「Who are you calling a caretaker? Stop calling me by that title, and while you're at it, stop using my full name for no reason.」

「Kukukukuh, and the sworn friend of my soul, the dark hero that was born on this night, the Nightmare Berserker Kurono! You are the star of tonight's party; how are you finding things? Have you been drinking?」

「No, well, I was thinking of drinking something now.」

「I see, I see! Drink, drink plenty! The alcohol expenses shall be paid for by Spada's national treasury, so you should drink to your heart's content!」

「That's... Thanks...」

Will is letting out his breath that stinks of alcohol in front of me and getting excited about something on his own. It's as if he hasn't noticed the explosive situation that we're in.

「How about it, Nero? Let us drink together, shall we? I must thank you for saving my foolish sister who threw herself onto the frontlines, after aaaall!」

「Tch, I'm not in that kind of mood right now.」

As if his anger has completely subsided, Nero releases my collar, turns around and begins to walk off.

His two party members seem to want to say something as he turns his back on us with a flutter of his red cape, but they follow him silently.

Of course, the students in front of them part to make way for them and they continue straight ahead, exiting through the banquet hall's front door.

「No matter, Nero's sullenness and poor sociability is a frequent occurrence! Now then, my fellow students who survived the incident in Iskia, let us pay him no heed and drink the night awaaaaaay! FAAHAHAHAHAAAA!」

With Nero's exit, the embers of conflict have been completely extinguished, and a lively atmosphere slowly returns to the banquet hall.

Realizing that we managed to get through that dangerous situation without anything too serious happening, I let out a sigh of relief.

And then I put a hand on my drunken friend's shoulder and whisper in his ear.

「... You saved me, Will. Thanks.」

「Fuh, you saw through it, huh. As to be expected from the sworn friend of my soul; you have read my intentions.」

Yeah, I'm really blessed to have friends like these. This is just one of the events that really make me appreciate that.

Note from the author: Nell:「No, I will definitely be going with you. Just as you are going to save your friends, there is someone I must save as well.」 This line was spoken in chapter 320,『Bad Person.』She was right; the person she needed

to save was right in front of her as she said it.

Chapter 356

Note from the author: BL warning...?

「Simon.」

Onii-san is calling me.

I open my eyes to see a face with sharp, cold-looking features. But this is the face of the close friend who understands me better than anyone else. It's quite close; actually, his body is close as well.

It seems that I'm being carried in his arms.

In the corner of my vision, I can see a wall made of solid stone. This dim, cramped space is the north defensive tower of Iskia Fortress, which I have spent the past few days secluded in.

There is only me and Onii-san in the room. There's no sign of the students who defended the tower with me.

The prototype rifle and the『Yata-Garasu』are lying nearby. It's likely that neither of them are loaded. I get the feeling that that's the case.

Up until this moment, I have been fighting with a gun in my hand. That crushed iron door was definitely supposed to have been pounded on and broken by Orcs.

Ah, but if Onii-san has come to help me, then that means I don't have to fight anymore.

「Simon...」(Kurono)

Onii-san's face, which has an unusually serious expression, draws closer and –

「?!」(Smon)

Before I know it, I'm being kissed. With a natural motion, like a kiss between lovers.

「– Puhah! W-what are you doing?!」(Simon)

Confused, I separate our lips. I push against his sturdy chest that is covered by

a black demon's coat with all the strength that my thin arms can muster, managing to put some distance between us.

「What am I doing, you ask? I'm kissing you, of course.」(Kurono)

He is giving me a doubtful look, as if genuinely confused as to why I asked that question.

「No, I mean, why are you kissing me?! Isn't this strange?!」(Simon)

「You're the one who made me feel like doing it, aren't you?」(Kurono)

He gives a dubious smile as the sharp gaze of his black and red eyes pierces straight through me. Uwah, he seems somewhat dangerous. It's startling, and my head is in a dangerous state as well.

「That was my first kiss, you know. I didn't think that you would give me a passionate French kiss.」(Kurono)

Th... Th-that's wrong! It's not wrong, but it's wrong!

It's true that I did extend my tongue out as well... or I get the feeling that I did, but I was in that strange state because of the Morjura's aphrodisiac, and – actually, that shouldn't count as a kiss, should it, Onii-san!

If medical procedures like artificial ventilation count, then my first kiss was with Ria-nee. As cruel as it is, during our childhood training that I didn't learn anything from, I had it done to me countless times.

So, you know, the fact that I became like that wasn't on purpose; it was something of an accident, so –

「Umm... That was, you know... a mistake...」(Simon)

Though the desire to deny his words is going in circles inside my head, only clumsy words come out of my mouth.

「Even if it was, that doesn't matter. I've already become serious about this, so give it up, Simon.」(Kurono)

「Eh, that's... No way... After all, we're both guys...」(Simon)

There's nothing I can do as Onii-san closes in on me once more. My body stiffens.

The only thing I can do is avert my gaze in embarrassment – and as I do so, I see a light.

That faint, pretty green light is spilling through the doorway covered by the iron door. A small silhouette peeks through the gaps in the doorway created by the Orc. Yes, the person on the other side of the door is looking at me.

Before I know it, our eyes have met. My eyes have met with the hollow, emerald-green eyes filled with murderous intent.

「UWAAAAAAAAAAAAAH LILY-SAN I'M SORRYYYYYYYYYYYY!」(Simon)

「-?!」(Simon)

As Simon leaps out of his bed onto his feet, he instantly realizes that he has been having some kind of crazy nightmare.

「Haah... I thought forcing me to rest was overdoing it, but it seems I really am tired...」(Simon)

Simon is currently resting his body at the mansion of his stepsister, Emilia Friedrich Bardiel. It is the same situation as when he returned to Spada after the battle of Alzas.

However, Simon's current mental state is considerably different from how it was back then. Simon is currently fairly healthy, perhaps because he has become more strong-willed after experiencing multiple harsh battles.

His memories of when he was attacked by the Morjura vaguely remain. He was intoxicated by the aphrodisiac compounds, so his consciousness was muddled in a drunken-like state, but that doesn't mean that he has completely forgotten those events, either.

His rifle sinking into the mucus, the tentacles coiling around him, the sweet smell – these fragments of memories alone are enough to stir an unpleasant feeling inside him, but Simon is not weak enough to let this break his mind.

「Hmm, but if I don't return soon, Onii-san will probably worry about me... O-Onii-san will...」(Simon)

However, it is painful to recall the memory of Kurono feeding him the antidote potion mouth-to-mouth. In a variety of ways.

「U-uwah... I really think I did something awful at that time...」(Simon)

Simon lets his body sink into the bed once more and squirms around.

The king-sized bed that is around double the size of the beds used in the dormitories has plenty of space to roll around on. The fabric spread out on top of it is one of the high-quality products sold by the Bardiel family, one of the Four Great Houses. This exceedingly soft, elastic material gently wraps around Simon as he agonizes over that event.

「B-but it should be fine, right? I'm sure Onii-san won't consider that his first kiss or anything. We're adventurers, after all. That kind of thing isn't out of the ordinary!」(Simon)

The techniques of administering artificial ventilation for people who have drowned and feeding potions mouth-to-mouth are commonly used by adventurers and knights. They are taught as fundamental techniques at the academy. Mannequins are used for lessons and training, so there are likely few who have actually done it in practice other than veteran adventurers, however.

「... Haah.」(Simon)

As if he has finally calmed down, Simon lets out a big sigh and sluggishly gets up from the enormous bed.

He sweated during his sleep because of the nightmare, so he feels disgusting. He can feel that it has soaked all the way through to his underwear, so it really is a substantial amount of sweat.

He fishes around in the closet, seemingly familiar with it, and searches for suitable clothes to change into. There have been various other occasions where Simon has been confined to his older sister's mansion, not only after the battle of Alzas. This room was used each time, so it is no exaggeration to say that this is Simon's personal room.

Of course, the items in the closet are all clothes for Simon to wear. There are certainly no extra-large-sized brassieres that have been custom-made for his older sister inside it.

He prepares a pair of plain underwear designed with practicality in mind, fit for a knight to wear, and some clothes that a young son of a noble family might

wear, though this isn't to Simon's taste. The underwear is fine, but he thinks that this shirt, pair of shorts and these suspenders are a bit too much. Even so, there is nothing he can do about it as these are still the clothes with the best design that are available to him. He definitely does not want to wear anything with frills on it.

With the disgusting feeling of the drenched clothes that he slept in sticking to him, he first strips all of them off and then begins to wipe his sweat away. As he cleans his body with the fresh towel that is always prepared for him and thinks that he wants to go back to the dormitories today –

「Simon, are you awake? I'm coming in.」

The voice that he hears along with a knock on his door is unmistakably that of his older sister Emilia.

「Eh?! Wait, wait a minute, Ria-nee –」(Simon)

Why does his onee-chan always open the door while knocking? There's no point in knocking if you're not going to wait for a reply, Simon complains in his head. But he is unable to prevent his sister from forcefully rushing into his room.

As his only act of resistance, he covers the front of his body with the towel.

「Hmm, you were already awake. You can still spend today sleeping –」(Emilia)

「I'm changing clothes right now, so don't come in!」(Simon)

Using the towel as his only unreliable layer of his almost-non-existent defense, Simon hunches his shoulders as he shouts in protest.

「What are you getting embarrassed for?」(Emilia)

「I'm embarrassed because I'm naked, of course!」(Simon)

「We've seen each other naked plenty of times as children, haven't we?」(Emilia)

「I'm an adult now!」(Simon)

This is a very reasonable objection, but in the end, Emilia quickly approaches Simon as if not concerned about such small details. This is the result that Simon

was expecting from the beginning, but being completely naked isn't a situation he can simply accept with a sigh.

「You sure sweated a lot; let me wipe it for you.」(Emilia)

「Eh, I don't need –」(Simon)

But resistance is futile; the towel is quickly transferred to Emilia's hands. Indeed, Simon's hope of covering his nether regions has been robbed from him.

「Uu, uu...」(Simon)

Emilia deliberately walks around to stand in front of the now completely-naked, defenseless Simon.

If someone were to see this scene of a shy, naked, handsome young man and a beautiful woman wearing the black Spadan military officer's uniform with red decorations, it would certainly appear incredibly suspicious.

Emilia would look like a female general who is about to enjoy a male prostitute who is working for the first time rather than an older sister considerately wiping her adorable younger brother's sweat.

There is no need to worry about what anyone may think, however. If there was, it would only be the employees of this mansion. They would even call a white object black if their master Emilia were to tell them it was black.

「... Did you have a bad dream?」(Emilia)

「Nnh, not really... I'm fine.」(Simon)

In the end, Emilia is bothering her younger brother. As if giving up, Simon entrusts his whole body to his sister and lets her do as she pleases.

「You know, Ria-nee.」(Simon)

Emilia gives a short reply of, 「What is it?」 as she carefully wipes Simon's small back.

「I'm fine now, so I'm going back to the dormitories today.」(Simon)

「You don't have to push yourself. You can still take a break from attending the academy, right?」(Emilia)

「No, there are things that I need to do, so I can't take it easy and rest like

this.」(Simon)

Simon hasn't been seriously injured. In fact, physically, he is completely unharmed. He is in a condition where it wouldn't be a problem for him to attend the decoration-awarding ceremony and victory celebration party today.

「No, but –」(Emilia)

As his sister gives a hesitant reply despite knowing that, Simon speaks to her with a small smile, a truly small smile.

「Ria-nee, you've kind of become a little nicer, haven't you?」(Simon)

「... I haven't.」(Emilia)

Simon has guessed that Emilia has allowed him to sleep here because after hearing that he was attacked by a Morjura, she was worried that he would be suffering from emotional damage.

Even if that isn't the case, the way she is meddling with his affairs now is different from how she was doing so when he returned from Alzas. The way she is nursing him is very pushy, including the way she is wiping his back, but considering that she is doing it with nothing but good intentions, he doesn't feel that opposed to it.

However, the change that Simon is most thankful for is that she is no longer voicing her displeasure at the fact that he is an alchemist.

「I was wondering if you've come to acknowledge me a little.」(Simon)

「You fought well.」(Emilia)

「Fufu, this is the first time that you're acknowledging something I've done, Ria-nee.」(Simon)

Unlike the battle of Alzas, the conditions of the battle of Iskia are clearly known. The students were forced into a harsh conflict to defend the fortress, and the defense they displayed would put the knights of Spada to shame. It is something that should be praised.

Simon thinks that the battle of Alzas was far more difficult, but even so, he feels confident that Emilia has acknowledged him as a result of the battle at Iskia Fortress.

「But don't push yourself too hard. The knights of Spada have duties that they must fulfil even at the cost of their own lives, but you're still a student. Prioritize your survival over everything else.」(Emilia)

「Y-yeah...」(Simon)

Simon has been wondering whether she knows about the problematic situation he is in, but it seems that she doesn't and he doesn't correct her. He silently allows his back to be wiped.

Time passes in silence, and Simon's body is cleaned without incident. He quickly finishes putting his clothes on as his sister watches him, and finally his body and heart both feel at ease.

「By the way, Ria-nee, did you need something?」(Simon)

Embarrassed to be wearing clothes intended for a noble family's young son as a grown adult, Simon snaps his suspenders with a dissatisfied expression as he asks his sister the reason she barged into his room.

「Yeah, I came to deliver something to you.」(Emilia)

Wondering what it is, Simon takes the package in Emilia's hand. Judging from its size and weight, he guesses that it is a single book.

「Well then, I've definitely given it to you.」(Emilia)

「Ah, yeah, thanks.」(Simon)

Finishing her blunt delivery, Emilia's black military uniform flutters as she turns and leaves the room. Just before she passes through the doorway, she turns around and speaks, as if she has just remembered something.

「Make your return to the dormitories tomorrow. Take care of yourself and just rest for today. Understand?」(Emilia)

Emilia leaves with these words.

This is her usual high-handed manner of speech, but Simon had a small, strange feeling that there was some kindness and appreciation towards him in it.

Now that he thinks about it, he gets the feeling that she said some strangely

understanding words right before he left for the open-field exercise – Did something happen for her to have a change of heart? He suspects that this might be the case, but since he does not live with his older sister, he has no way of knowing what might have happened to her.

He welcomes this change and half-jokingly, half-seriously wishes that she would stop nagging and nitpicking every little thing as he unwraps the package.

And then he is lost for words in the next moment. At the same time, his spine freezes.

「Angel Ring...」(Simon)

Inside is the nightmarish brainwashing Magic Item that Lily once showed him.

That alone wouldn't be a problem. No, if the Law Guardians of Spada knew the purpose of this dangerous item, they would deem it illegal and arrest him, but for now, he holds it in place.

Simon has already taken it apart and examined every small part of it. He is confident that he knows a lot about both Lily and this Ring.

The problem is the letter that accompanies this ring. It is written in the round, adorable handwriting of a little girl, but its contents cause Simon to tremble in fear.

『I have learned the technique for controlling human brains. With this, I can finally begin development of a mass-production model –』

This letter eloquently describes the success that has finally been achieved after Lily's repeated human experiments.

As a matter of fact, Simon was half-convinced that Lily would never be able to make full use of these Rings.

This is definitely not because he was looking down on Lily. He had concluded that the Rings were so complex and mysterious in their structure that it would be impossible for even the instructors of the academy and the mages of the royal castle to decipher how it worked and how to make it perform its originally-intended function within a month or less.

However, it appears that the gods of Pandora have blessed Lily with a most

terrible talent.

『With regards to mass-production, I've already drawn a general blueprint. I want to hear your opinion after you have seen it –』

The numerous documents that came in a set with the letter are indeed blueprints with a general outline of the design for an improved version of the Ring.

It seems that Lily has completely memorized the documents regarding the investigation of the Ring that Simon previously sent her; there are many sections where the description is based on Simon's predictions down to the smallest part. And there are detailed descriptions of functions she has newly discovered after having actually used it as well as corrections to Simon's predictions that were off the mark.

Reading this, Simon is plunged even further into despair.

「I-I can do it... I can probably make this...」(Simon)

Lily's blueprint is almost flawless. The structure is, of course, well-detailed but Lily has even calculated the cost of manufacturing each part and made adjustments so as to not require high-quality materials like Mythril.

Considering her ability as an adventurer of the Element Masters and the income that she would be earning from now on, mass-production of these Rings is within the realm of possibility.

That is precisely why Simon is at a loss as to what to do.

If he really mass-produced these –

「This is a nightmare... But, I...」(Simon)

As an alchemist, he wants to try building it. It is an extremely attractive Magic Item to try and build, this『Angel Ring』– no, after the improvements Lily has made to its design, it has been renamed to『Fairy Ring.』

Note from the author:

This chapter contained the possibility of a second BL section, the reconciliation between Simon and his onee-chan and the dreadfulness of Lily-san.

Chapter 358

As I return to the academy from the Stratos Smithing Workshop, the sound of a bell signals midday and the beginning of lunch break.

It's already midday, huh. I suppose that's only to be expected, since I spent quite a while discussing ideas for strengthening my weapons with Regin-san.

That number of weapons with that large amount of monster materials. I knew that discussing my options would take a while, so I let Fiona and Lily make their requests first.

Apparently the two of them have plans for the afternoon, so I came back on my own without waiting for them after making my requests.

They said they'd be back before dinner, so that means I'm alone until then.

Simon hasn't returned to the dormitories yet and Will is apparently incapacitated due to a hangover.

「I can't really go to visit Nell, either...」(Kurono)

After incurring Nero's wrath at last night's party, I think it would be awkward – no, it seems that it would be difficult to approach her.

I wouldn't have cared a few days ago; I would have thought,「Who cares about people's feelings when my friend is feeling ill!」But it can't be helped; Lily and Fiona have hammered into my head just how dangerous the social status of royalty is. I can't make such careless moves.

Well, since Nell is resting in a women's dormitory that prohibits men from entering, I can't visit her normally anyway. Going as far as to commit a criminal act in order to visit my friend would be bad. It's the dormitory for the cadet women; it has particularly strict security. A man like me might be arrested just for loitering near it.

That still applies even if I am the Rank 5 adventurer who rose to fame in Spada overnight.

「Hey, isn't it that person? The berserker who groped and killed both monsters

and students at the Iskia Hills with his tentacles.](Girl 1)

「Eek, his face is super scary! Seriously, I might have nightmares tonight, you know!](Girl 2)

As soon as I pass a pair of girls each carrying a small, cute-looking lunch box, presumably on their way to eat lunch, I hear this conversation.

It's plenty loud enough to hear without straining my ears, and their stares are incredibly blatant.

「Kyah! He's glaring in this direction!](Girl 1)

「No, I don't want to be touched by tentacles, no!](Girl 2)

And then the two of them run away, making a lot of noise. The footsteps of the super-heavyweight pair of girls, a Golem and Cyclops, remind me of those of the Greed-Gore.

「D-damn it...](Kurono)

Even though I received those great awards, this is still how I'm treated.

Nevertheless, I'd at least like my actions to be reported accurately. What do you mean, grope and kill? They're even saying that I killed students indiscriminately. If I had been in a Berserk status back then, I would have been executed on the spot rather than decorated with awards.

「Let's just forget about it... I'll just eat something nice at the cafeteria and forget about it.](Kurono)

That's right, it's best just to not pay them any attention. It's not like I want fame or anything, right? I received awards, rose to Rank 5, I should be receiving quite a lot of money as a reward and I'll be given information about the Crusaders. I'm gaining things that I would have never imagined I would gain, aren't I?

That's why I don't care about what people around me think. I've been used to people being scared of me and running away from me after seeing my face since high school. I should be used to it. Let's say I'm used to it.

Now then, I'm not like Fiona, but let's distract myself with some delicious food. I'm going to be receiving a lot of reward money so I suppose I'll go with

something a bit extravagant today. Now that I think about it, I also have the 13,000,000 Klans that I received as prize money from the『Curse Carnival』in my wallet.

Ah, aren't I super rich right now? Since I have this much, Fiona can go on one of her gourmet tours around Spada anytime she likes. I can treat her to as much sushi and tempura as she wants.

No, this is amazing, it's really amazing. I've obtained the funds I need to return the favor for the expensive presents they've given me! I don't have to feel guilty anymore, yahoo!

「Excuse me, you over there with the evil smile.」

「... Eh?」(Kurono)

I'm extremely embarrassed, but if I think about it, the voice that's calling out to me is being very rude.

I turn around to see a female student. Judging from her hostile gaze, I'm guessing she isn't one of my fans.

「You are Kurono, aren't you?」(Female student)

「That is right. Is there something you needed from me?」(Kurono)

I'm using my terribly unpopular formal language, but I suppose it's needed when talking to someone I'm meeting for the first time.

The female student who called out to me is quite a beauty. That beauty goes to waste because of the clear expression of displeasure on her face, however.

She has shoulder-length blonde hair and upturned, clear-blue eyes. Blonde hair and blue eyes are relatively commonly-seen traits in Spada. She doesn't have long ears, nor is her body made of steel, so she's definitely a human.

Judging from the red cape fluttering at her back, it's also clear that she is a cadet. As I wonder if she's a daughter of a rich family, it makes sense; there's something elegant about her face.

「Yes. As unpleasant as this is, I can't overlook you any more than this.」
(Female student)

Well then, what does she mean by overlook? This should definitely be the first time we've met, so it's not like there's some kind of connection like there is between myself and Nero.

「I have absolutely no idea what you mean by overlook.」(Kurono)

「Whether you are aware of it yourself or not doesn't concern me.」(Female student)

Uwah, the way's talking is dangerous. She's definitely the type of person who's not going to hear me out.

She vividly reminds me of the woman with blonde drills who barged into the arena during the『Curse Carnival.』

「Come to think of it, I have not introduced myself yet, have I? Pardon me; a knight should at least show this common courtesy, even when facing a detested enemy.」(Female student)

Wait, by detested enemy, do you mean me? Come on, seriously, please spare me. What on earth have I done?

「My name is Helen, first-born daughter of the Azrael house, one of the Twelve Noble Houses that have served the royal family of Avalon since ancient times.」(Helen)

Haah, is that so. I almost say this careless reply out loud without thinking, but I somehow manage to catch it in my throat.

It's the first time I've heard of these Twelve Noble Families of Avalon, but, well, I suppose it's a title like the Four Great Houses of Spada.

I can guess this much, so I don't need to be considerate enough to act surprised –

「And I am the commanding officer of Princess Nell's guards.」(Helen)

「Seriously?!」(Kurono)

I can't help being surprised. She really has guards?

「... Princess Nell's mind is currently very ill.」(Helen)

Helen-san – no, I suppose I can drop the honorific – Helen glares at me with

an expression that looks as if she is holding herself back from saying,「What a vulgar savage you are」in response to my surprised reaction.

「I was not able to help her recover from her depressed state. However, I am able to eliminate the one who caused her condition. No, that is not it – I simply cannot forgive you for hurting Princess Nell.」(Helen)

I heard that Nell's collapse was caused by fatigue from expending too much of her mana. I have a lot of questions I want to ask, like how that could cause her mind to be ill or how that could be my fault. But with Helen's menacing presence before me, I can't confirm or deny anything and I realize that saying anything would be futile.

「Haah... I can really understand why Lily and Fiona were so angry at me...」(Kurono)

This is the exact situation that they were worried about. Even if Nell and I consider each other friends, those around us will never acknowledge that friendship.

A lowly adventurer becoming overly familiar with a beautiful princess is an unforgivable『evil.』

I can understand Nero picking a fight with me as her older brother. But I feel that this hostility towards me that has been caused by misunderstandings and prejudiced opinions is unreasonable, and I'm starting to get angry. I'm done using formal language.

「So what is it you're planning to do to me? Are you going to suggest that we have a duel?」(Kurono)

「Good guess. Yes, exactly, we will suggest a duel with you.」(Helen)

「I see. We, huh.」(Kurono)

I've become surrounded without realizing. From the outside, it may appear as if curious onlookers have gathered around after sensing the serious atmosphere between me and Helen.

However, these male and female students have surrounded me in the middle of this narrow road and are gazing at me with expressions full of hostility.

「The ones gathered here are no foolish commoners who have merely been charmed by Princess Nell's kindness and beauty. They are all exchange students from Avalon. Like me, they are all guards who have sworn loyalty to the royal family from the bottom of their hearts.」(Helen)

Management cadets with red capes, knight cadets wearing normal uniforms with blazers, adventurers wearing light armor or robes. These guys are all from Avalon, huh. There are quite a lot of exchange students, aren't there?

「But rest assured, we will not take your life. We will apply the rules of the mock battles allowed at this academy.」(Helen)

「You can kill someone even with a wooden sword if you hit them in the wrong spot, can't you?」(Kurono)

「Yes. Let us both be very careful to avoid any accidents.」(Helen)

I see. I have a good understanding of their intentions. I instinctively think that I don't want to be the subject of this lynching. But now that I don't have my weapons with me, I suppose this is the perfect opportunity.

The training I did with Mia-chan wasn't just for the parade.

「Alright, I'll accept a duel with all of you. Are we doing it here?」(Kurono)

「Heavens, no. We have arranged to use the colosseum, so we shall settle things there fair and square with no running away.」(Helen)

As elegant as Helen is, she can't fully conceal her sadistic personality from showing in her evil smile. Fine, if that's how you want it, I won't hold back.

I feel sorry for you guys, but I'll have you become my guinea pigs to test out the second and third divine protections.

Chapter 357

I have safely made it through yesterday's ceremony and party. Today is the 7th of Blue Moon (Sougetsu).

The three of us, the『Element Masters』, have decided to visit the Stratos Smithing Workshop so that I can have the weapons I used in the battle of Iskia examined and repaired, as well as to make improvements to them using the materials that I've obtained.

「Welcome,『Element Masters.』It is an honor for the conversation topic of the entire nation of Spada, the newly-promoted Rank 5 adventurer party, to choose to utilize our services. Thank you very much, Kurono-san.」(Regin)

Regin-san, the owner and craftsman of this store, welcomes us with the same kind smile that he was wearing the previous time we visited this place with Simon.

The『Element Masters』became Rank 5 adventurers and broke the previous record for the fastest party Ranking-up held by『Wing Road』by a considerable margin. As Regin says, these facts are well-known throughout Spada.

We haven't attracted any unwanted attention for the time being as we're wearing our academy uniforms on this excursion. I'm sure that my black coat, Lily's black dress and Fiona's three-cornered hat and witch's robe became famous as our unique adventurers' outfits during the parade.

One would normally be happy about becoming more famous as an adventurer, but in my case, there's a high risk of something troublesome happening, or more like I just have a bad feeling. There's no use worrying about it now, though. Whatever happens, happens.

「Oh no, it's just that the『Wrath-Pun's Right Arm』that you strengthened for me performed incredibly, so I have the utmost faith in your skill, Regin-san.」(Kurono)

「To think that you believe in my skill to this extent. Thank you very much.」(Regin)

But it pains me knowing that I have to tell him that the『Wrath-Pun's Right Arm』was destroyed spectacularly. I take full responsibility for using it in a reckless way beyond its limits; I'm terribly sorry. I did it intentionally.

Actually, without more Wrath-Pun materials, rebuilding it would be... Well, let's try asking and see how far we get.

「Excuse me, do you do work with magical staves here? Enhancements included.」(Fiona)

Fiona, who is standing next to me, asks this question. The reason I brought Fiona as well as Lily, who is currently wandering about inside the store, is because they apparently need to adjust their equipment as well.

Of course, as magic-users, the equipment they use are Magic Items or a staff in Fiona's case.

「Yes. It is not my area of expertise, but I do work with them. Though if it is an Artifact, it may be impossible depending on what it is.」(Regin)

「No, that should be sufficient.」(Fiona)

A blacksmith's area of expertise lies in bladed or pointed weapons like swords and spears; it's common for a different kind of craftsman to specialize in handling magical staves. It's rare for an individual to be able to work with both, but I suppose it's no different from an adventurer who can both wield a sword and use magic.

Now that I think about it, the prototype rifle I finished off the Sloth-Gil with was made here in the Stratos Smithing Workshop. This gun has had numerous aspects of it such as loading, the shooting process as well as its firepower improved by magic formulas, so it probably falls under the "magical staff" side of things. The rifle has a genuine, completely magic-free firing mechanism, so it is a gun in the truest sense.

In other words, Regin-san has already accomplished the construction of a staff-like rifle.

「Well then, I suppose all three of us will be leaving our equipment with you.」
(Kurono)

「Ah, that's right, Kurono-san, I forgot to tell you. I actually have some knowledge regarding how to train cursed weapons. Neglecting proper maintenance of even cursed weapons will have an effect on their power and durability. And it's possible that if you anger the will of the curse itself, the weapon will not manifest its power.」(Regin)

「I-I see...」(Kurono)

I'm surprised to hear that. Regin-san seems knowledgeable about cursed weapons. It's really possible to anger the will of the curses?

「Goshujin-samaa~ I want to become clean as well~」(Hitsugi)

Well, I can imagine that being the case for you. But learning that even the『Absolute Malice Hatchet『Neck Cutter』』would become angry if not maintained is a surprise.

I did perform basic maintenance, but, hmm. Maybe I should have a professional maintain my weapons from time to time.

「Mumumuh, Nata-senpai* is the number one for you after all, Goshujin-sama... But Hitsugi won't lose to her!」(Hitsugi)

TLN*: As mentioned before, Nata is Japanese for “hatchet” so this is what Hitsugi calls Neck Cutter

The cursed hatchet doesn't speak other than senseless words of bloodthirst, so I'll say it instead: Stop using that name. I'm getting the feeling that this girl has been getting more talkative ever since she evolved into the『Black Chain Curse『Iron Cage.』』

In any case, what I'm interested in isn't Hitsugi's feelings, but –

「No way~ Goshujin-sama! Please pay more attention to Hitsugi~!」(Hitsugi)

– So noisy. Be quiet for a bit. That's an order.

「How does it sound, Kurono-san? Won't you please give me the opportunity to provide you with this service?」(Regin)

「Yes. Well then, we'll leave it in your hands. Err, there are quite a lot of them, will it be alright?」(Kurono)

「It is not as if I will be rebuilding them from scratch, so they will not take too much time and effort. It would take me less than a week to handle a hundred weapons.」(Regin)

I see, so it won't be a problem. If my cursed weapons are out of my hands for too long, I won't be able go on quests. They are my main weapons, after all.

「Now then, I will write down the requests of each person for their weapons. Let me see, I shall start with Kurono-san –」(Regin)

And with that, I unexpectedly end up leaving all of my cursed weapons in his care.

「Goshujin-sama~ Hitsugi is lonely~」(Hitsugi)

Can you stop resisting every time I try to remove you from my hands...?

「Now then, I have received their request, but, hmm...」(Regin)

With the great variety of equipment in front of him that he has brought into the workshop, Regin murmurs as he strokes his chin that has not a trace of a typical Dwarf's beard growing on it.

His demeanor is only to be expected. The requests that he has received from the up-and-coming Rank 5 adventurer party, the『Element Masters』, are numerous and too complex for a mere blacksmith to handle.

If Regin's skill corresponded to the appearance of his small shop, he would have meekly directed them to other workshops.

In the first place, it is incredibly rare for a single craftsman to be able to handle normal weapons, cursed weapons and magical staves. A blacksmith capable of this would be equivalent to a Rank 5 Magic Swordsman in adventurer terms.

Regin's title of『Death Maker』is not just for show. Not even Simon who visits the store often knows this, let alone Kurono.

What he needs to complete this task is not skill or assistance, but simply his equipment.

「First of all, I suppose my workshop alone can manage the witch lady's items.」(Regin)

He places the two Wands that Fiona brought onto the well-organized workbench.

Both of them are red in color with simple designs, but there is a large difference between them in the power that they contain.

One of them is the『Custom Fireball』that Fiona has been using habitually for a long time. With a single glance, Regin can indeed see signs that it has been well-used, but also signs that it has been well-maintained.

It possesses the ability to always release『Ignis Sagita』spells of a fixed strength, making it very reliable for a new academy student.

But as the『Custom』at the beginning of the Wand's name indicates, it has had remodeled magical formulas incorporated into it that grant it the ability to release spells with a tremendous rate of fire. Even Regin, who is not an adventurer, can imagine that it is greatly useful against monsters such as Goblins and Slimes that rely purely on their numbers.

The other Wand must also be addressed. Fiona told him earlier with an unconcerned tone that it was something that she picked up, so she doesn't know its name. But Regin immediately guesses what it is called.

This Wand's name is『Ruby Bullet.』

It is a highly powerful Wand specialized for fire-element spells developed by the mages of Avalon's royal palace. Its basic qualities as a staff such as elemental enhancement, casting speed and mana consumption are exceptional, yet it has a distinct user-friendliness that allows even novices to use it.

It can be used by anyone from a novice mage student to a veteran adventurer fighting on the frontlines to skilled knights. When these Wands were officially issued, Avalon would be a step above the other nations when it came to fire-element magic – or so it was thought, but that never became reality.

The cost of creating the Wand. Because it could not overcome this simple and yet unyielding barrier, the『Ruby Bullet』simply became yet another one of the numerous available high-grade Wands.

That makes no difference to the fact that this Wand is a highly powerful piece of equipment. The request that Fiona made is to use the『Ruby Bullet』as

materials to improve upon the base of the『Custom Fireball.』

As long as he doesn't have to reproduce the items' unique abilities, it is not difficult to combine two weapons to create a stronger one. It is just a simple application of the『Transmutation』smithing technique used to incorporate monster materials into weapons.

「The biggest problem is the Fairy ojou-ch – no, Lily-san's request...」(Regin)

There is a blueprint in Regin's hands. Lily requested that he build the Magic Item detailed on it.

Its name,『Fairy Ring』, makes it evident that it is an item with the ability to brainwash people. A clearly illegal item.

However, when Lily handed him the blueprint, Regin heard a message delivered to him directly inside his head.

「Since you are known as the Death Maker, you'll be able to make this, right?」(Lily)

Regin regrets that the Mind Protection that he cast on his own mind has grown weak due to the long time he has spent living a peaceful blacksmith's lifestyle.

That Fairy who is adorable only in appearance has seen the monstrous urge to create that exists within him.

Only he and his wife understood what lurks in his heart, but now that has been unexpectedly leaked.

「It is a prototype model, but I can't cut any corners... For this, I'll have to borrow some equipment from President Mordred. Well, I still have to manufacture guns and I was thinking of discussing things with him anyway, so I suppose this is the perfect opportunity.」(Regin)

As he comes to a decision, Regin finally faces the will of the curses.

「Cursed weapons really are excellent.」(Regin)

An ambitious smile of old appears on Regin's face.

The nine Nameless weapons are lying against a wall in front of him. They are

the weapons that he performed repairs on just a few days ago.

The reason the contestant that Kurono faced in the first round of the『Cursed Carnival』was driven crazy by the Nameless longsword is because Regin strengthened its malice himself.

Though the Nameless weapons possess curses of the lowest grade and Regin had done enough work that they would likely be fine to use for another year without maintenance, the nine weapons before his eyes now have chipped blades and other signs of wear.

Regin would never have imagined that they would be used in a battle against a Rank 5 monster immediately after being released from Mordred's collection case. The fact that none of them have been broken is quite an achievement.

「Hmm, hmm... all of their curses have grown stronger. That either shows just how fierce the battle at Iskia was or how talented Kurono-san is.」(Regin)

What is amazing is not the『Blackening』magic that Kurono uses to cover the cursed weapons in black mana and force them to obey him. Using mana to Enchant a cursed weapon is the simplest way to control them. Of course, the amount of mana required to do this increases exponentially with the strength of the weapon's curse.

The vast amount of mana Kurono must have to be able to command the powerful curses with Blackening alone is certainly one of the talents that he has been blessed with. But this alone wouldn't necessarily lead to the curses growing and evolving.

「Well, I suppose this one would not be damaged from a single battle.」(Regin)

The『Haunted Grave』that is stained black all the way up to its blade by Kurono's Blackening is releasing an invisible, intimidating aura as if to show that it isn't on the same level as the Nameless weapons next to it.

No, that isn't the only thing Regin feels. If he listens carefully, he can hear an evil melody sung by the beautiful voice of a woman coming from the blade.

「Not only does it make corpses move once more, it can even cause them to evolve into powerful Undead monsters in certain cases. Interesting. It seems that it has some powers that are still hidden.」(Regin)

Like many of Spada's people, Regin watched the victory parade. He immediately comes to the conclusion that the Nightmare that terrified the crowd that was gathered there is something that evolved under the influence of『Dead Revival.』

Even appraisal through magical methods does not reveal all of the power that curses could be concealing. How much of that power can be drawn out depends on the user. Regin cannot help but to anticipate that Kurono will be able to unleash all of the powers contained in the『Haunted Grave.』

There is nothing that he can do for the time being other than to carefully sharpen the weapon's blade, however.

「Hmm, this one needs quite a bit of repair.」(Regin)

On another workbench is a greatsword whose blade is made of a monster's fang.

It is the『Hungering Wolf Sword『Evil Eater』』that has inherited the Characteristic Ability of the Rank 5 monster,『Chaos Eater』, and the malice of a Werewolf who died in the depths of despair.

It possesses its original Evil Eater ability and the monster fang is an exceptionally sturdy material, but the blade currently has a large hole in it. It looks as if another enormous fang has pierced through it.

When questioned about it, Kurono told Regin that it was damaged when it stopped an attack released by the Greed-Gore. He also said that he even used a defensive spell in addition, so it is easy to imagine just how powerful the attack was.

But as if the weapon's malicious will is unaware of such circumstances, the blade is letting out a groaning, creaking noise. It seems as if it wishes to devour the enemy before it.

「Hmm, no, as it is, it might actually be...」(Regin)

Indeed, in this workshop is the enemy responsible for the serious damage that the『Hungering Wolf Sword『Evil Eater』』has suffered. The small floor space is largely occupied by a mass of reddish-brown rock and a pile of black sand.

These are the monster materials that Kurono possessed the rights to obtain as the adventurer who defeated the monsters. They are the Greed-Gore's carapace and the Sloth-Gil's iron sand.

Even a novice blacksmith who has not yet held a hammer for even a year would be able to tell that the super-hard carapace, possibly better be described as a layer of heavy rock, would bestow tremendous abilities to any equipment it is used for, whether it is armor or a weapon.

The same applies for the iron sand. From what Regin has heard, it seems that the Greed-Gore's earth-element Characteristic Ability and the Sloth-Gil's lightning-element Characteristic Ability were both used to gather this iron sand from the earth, but Regin has been working with monster materials for forty years. He is well aware that this is completely different from normal iron sand, in both physical and magical terms.

It is based on iron sand and it does appear to be iron sand, but in reality, it is a new kind of mineral that contains hidden mana. The one who has named it『Greed Metal』is not Regin, but Kurono. The one who slew the monster gains the right to name such things.

This is a wondrous material that was created by the extraordinary event of the Greed-Gore being parasitized by the Sloth-Gil.

From time to time, unique materials like this appear as part of powerful monsters designated as Rank 5. It is because Rank 5 monsters pose the greatest threat to people among all monsters and possess special characteristics that they are treated differently, just like Rank 5 adventurers.

「With this much, even if I invest some of it for the strengthening of weapons, there will be some left over. In fact, even if I make a new weapon from scratch...」(Regin)

Regin wears a problem-solving expression as if truly enjoying himself while considering his options. As he begins to closely examine the red rock and the iron sand –

「– Ah.」(Regin)

He unexpectedly almost trips over. No, to describe it more accurately, his leg

has been caught.

Glossy black hair has wrapped itself around his ankle.

「Fufu, my oh my, what a lively ojou-chan.」(Regin)

Lightly shaking his leg free of the black hair around it, he gives a gentle smile towards the perpetrator of this prank.

「Kishaah!」(Hitsugi)

This threatening voice comes from the pair of gloves wriggling around on top of a workbench. There are lengths of hair extending from its fingertips towards Regin's ankle. Of course, they have not loosened their grip.

「I will clean you properly later, so please behave yourself for now.」(Regin)

With a tone as if he is gently scolding his grandchild, Regin lightly touches the gloves, the『Black Chain Curse『Iron Cage』』, with his fingertip that has the roughness of a blacksmith's.

For a moment, lines of a red – no, the bright orange color of flowing magma – form a geometric pattern on his index finger.

The only one in the world who can decipher this spell formula is Regin himself. In other words, this is an original spell.

However, the effect of the magic at his fingertip is an embodiment of simplicity.

「Kyauun...」(Hitsugi)

As Regin hears an adorable voice that sounds like an auditory hallucination, the lively cursed gloves fall quiet as if going to sleep.

「Hahaha, good girl, good girl.」(Regin)

Regin gives a satisfied smile, but as he turns back to the blade in front of him, it changes into a bitter one.

「It seems I should be more careful about touching this ojou-chan...」

The『Absolute Malice Hatchet『Neck Cutter.』』The large hatchet that bears the most powerful curse among all of Kurono's weapons is releasing an intense red-and-black aura, as if it refuses to be touched by anyone other than its master.

As he stares at it, the aura that is rising from it like steam begins to take the shape of a young girl's face –

「I'll wait for my wit to return before I handle her.」(Regin)

Giving a large sigh as he realizes how laborious the request he has accepted will be, he quickly begins to make preparations to get to work.

「I suppose I will be doing all-nighters for the first time in a while.」(Regin)

However, the expression on his face is a bright one. It resembles that of a battle-crazed fanatic finally returning to the battlefield after a long recovery from an injury.

Chapter 359

Unconscious students are lying on the hard ground of the Royal Spada Academy's prided colosseum.

「W-what on earth is going on...」(Helen)

Helen, the eldest daughter of the Azrael family that is one of Avalon's Twelve Noble Houses, whispers dumbfoundedly as she looks at the bodies that are scattered across the ground.

「... Next.」(Kurono)

As if taking no notice of her trembling, a man's cold voice reverberates throughout the circular space of the arena.

A man wearing the same black academy uniform as the other students is standing in the center of the arena. However, on the inside, that man is a monster with unimaginable power.

「I-I'll go!」(Male student)

One of the followers that Helen has brought here in large numbers – no, one of Nell's guards, steps forward.

A male student of the knight course, holding a standardized wooden sword used for swordsmanship training, gives a shout and begins his charge.

His stance and the speed of his movement can be called exceptional for a knight cadet, but –

「Gyih?!」(Knight cadet)

A line of black fire flashes across the open space. A flower of purple lightning bursts.

The number of victims collapsed in the arena increases by one.

「Next.」(Kurono)

「Kuh... Gnnh...」(Helen)

Helen's beautiful, elegant face is filled with bitterness, impatience and some

kind of fear. Everyone can tell how she feels, but everyone remains silent. Finally, nobody volunteered to step forward.

「What's wrong? Are you done already?」(Kurono)

The man's flat-toned voice expresses no dissatisfaction at the lack of challengers; he is simply confirming that there are indeed no more. But the black-and-red gaze that pierces straight through Helen is endlessly sharp and cold.

「You... demon...」(Helen)

Kurono. That is the name of this demon.

The cunning man who deceived the beloved Princess Nell, and yet dares to desire the brilliant glory of being the hero of Iskia.

Helen has been wary of Kurono for a long time. To be more precise, ever since he instigated trouble in the dining hall. Kurono's behavior is problematic in itself, but the most problematic thing of all is that the pure princess who is overflowing with kindness shows no caution whatsoever; in fact, she approaches dangerous people of her own will.

Helen knows that this has caused Nell's older brother, Prince Nero, to sense that Nell was greatly at risk. That is why Helen felt no need to act up until now. Nero, the true, flawless hero, the one who will become the next generation's king and lead the nation of Avalon, was constantly at Nell's side. Everything could be entrusted to him.

However, when the knight that protected the princess was separated from her for a short while –

「Kurono-san isn't that kind of person!」(Nell)

「Kurono-san is my important friend. Please stop speaking ill of him.」(Nell)

Helen would never forget the 24th of the Month of Platinum (Hakkin). Sensing that disturbing events were occurring, she made up her mind and scolded the princess, and that was the result.

Helen had never felt as much regret as she did at that point in time. Nell had already been caught in Kurono's poisonous fangs.

Officially, she was nothing more than a school friend, a classmate to Nell. She had no way to stop Nell after that.

She couldn't stop Nell's participation in the tournament involving terrible cursed weapons, nor could she stop Nell from using the『Scale of White Wings』, one of Avalon's national treasures, for Kurono's sake.

And now she is in that state after returning from Iskia Fortress.

Of course, as Helen lives in the same women's dormitory, she has visited Nell numerous times. And every time she saw Nell's lifeless, doll-like eyes, she felt a deep sadness that was as if her heart was being torn to shreds, and one thought runs through her mind: Kurono cannot be forgiven.

What happened in Iskia between Nell and Kurono is still unclear, as Nell herself never speaks about it. But knowing that Kurono is the cause of her current state is enough.

This man who is the cause of Princess Nell's sorrow cannot be forgiven. Helen was determined enough to throw away her pride as a knight to carry out this lynch-like attack.

Helen was burning with rage, but she had never underestimated Kurono's ability. He has the achievement of defeating a Rank 5 monster to his name.

Even the exchange students from Avalon who have exceptional academic records cannot overcome their limits as students. There wasn't even a sliver of a chance at any of them defeating Kurono one-on-one.

But no matter how powerful Kurono is, fatigue would accumulate if he fought battle after consecutive battle. Fatigue would weaken his attacks, slow his movements and affect his judgment. If he ran out of mana, not only spells but also martial skills would not function properly.

Even though these elite guards couldn't match up to Kurono in strength, they were full of fighting spirit granted to them by their loyalty to Nell and their anger towards Kurono. At least one of them was sure to last long enough to land a blow.

However, there are only defeated guards in front of Helen. None of them have even been able to get in range of Kurono to connect with their wooden

swords, let alone landed a blow.

Kurono is standing upright in a defenseless position, holding his own wooden sword in one hand with no proper stance. But once he attacks, his target would be struck down in one hit by his mysterious black lightning magic without any opportunity to retaliate.

Helen wasn't bothered about the first couple of people to suffer this fate. An offensive spell powerful enough to defeat enemies in a single hit, cast with no incantation or casting motion, wouldn't be possible to cast consecutively too many times. It was their aim to cause him fatigue, so having him use powerful magic was exactly what they had hoped for.

But it seems that Kurono wants to cut the number of Nell's guards gathered here in half. Twenty, no, thirty of them are already unable to fight any further.

In other words, even after thirty consecutive battles, Kurono has a cool expression on his face without even having run out of breath. There is no sign of the mana emitted from his body growing weaker.

「Just what kind of stamina do you have...?」(Helen)

Kurono's class is Berserker. Judging from the fact that he chose to use a wooden sword instead of a staff designed for use in practice battles, it is not a mage-type class.

With that being the case, he must have beaten the Greed-Gore to death with martial skills as his core method of fighting, with magic to support it. Despite being someone who has been acknowledged as a Rank 5 adventurer, the amount of mana he possesses shouldn't be as much as that of a first-class mage.

Helen already understands that her assumptions were completely off the mark. But even though she understands this, there is nothing she can do about it.

What could be done against a berserker who can consecutively cast spells that defeat enemies in a single hit with an endless supply of mana? Even if this question was asked to people other than Helen who has lost her composure due to her frustration, none would be likely to give an answer.

Who would be able to come up with a way to overcome an undefeatable foe in a situation where running away is not an option?

Indeed, Helen is in the mental state of a general of a defeated army who cannot escape.

「Oi, if you tell me that's all you've got, I'm going to go back, you know?」
(Kurono)

As if growing tired of waiting in this long silence, Kurono speaks in a bored tone.

「W-wait! I will be your next opponent!」(Helen)

The Azrael house is a family of dragon knights who serve Avalon's royal family. Helen didn't possess the talent to become a dragon knight herself, but it has been decided that she would serve as a mage of the Knights' Order.

If this is going to end in a pitiful, crushing defeat, then she wants to at least step forward and challenge Kurono herself before she falls.

As a noble, she has the resolve to bear full responsibility for this lost battle.

The one responsible for this duel is Helen herself. There was a rising discontent with Kurono among the guards, but as the captain of the guards, the cause of this suggestion/plan/action to purge Kurono is none other than her.

「You don't have you push yourself, you know.」(Kurono)

「Silence!」(Helen)

It is unlikely that she looks very outraged right now. She has noticed it herself, the unconscious trembling of her body. There is no doubt that her facial expression is also full of fear, far from an expression of bravery.

Even so, she has steeled her resolve, but this man has even gone as far as to point out her fear. He is trampling over her determination; this is the act of a demon.

「If you tell me we're doing this, then I'll do it...」(Kurono)

As she trembles in fear of her imminent defeat, none of the guards can laugh at her for being a coward. Even though it is supposed to be a duel, it is nothing

more than a mock battle. Nobody's lives are on the line. Thinking about it normally, this is the case.

However, her opponent is a cunning demon who deceived the princess of an entire nation. Even though Helen is the daughter of a noble family of Avalon, challenging someone to a battle with an advantage in numbers is an outrageous act. In other words, it is no different from a criminal act. It is likely that Kurono is aware of this.

If it were possible to crush Kurono with strength alone, there would be no problems. It would be overlooked and hushed up. But what would happen if she were crushed by his strength instead?

Kurono has the opportunity to seize the initiative under these circumstances. Their positions would be reversed; this time, it would be his turn to do the threatening. No, that situation is already about to begin.

That is why Helen will at least make herself the only loss, as the perpetrator of this incident. That is her responsibility as a noblewoman, as a knight and, above all, as the captain of Princess Nell's guards.

Helen has already prepared herself. She is prepared to be defeated; in other words, she is offering herself to Kurono.

As the daughter of a strict noble family, she was supposed to firmly protect her chastity until she married, but if the evil Tentacle Man so wishes, with her pure body, he can...

「Well then, everyone who's left is free to all come at me at once, too.」
(Kurono)

The demon murmurs.

「The difference in our strengths is clear now, isn't it? If you don't do that, it won't be a fair fight. And also, this is a waste of time.」(Kurono)

Kurono whispers as if thinking about how truly disappointing things turned out even though he took the time to skip class to do this.

「What did you say...?」(Helen)

If they all attack at once, it might be possible – no, the moment after this

thought occurs to her, Helen realizes.

This is a trap. There is no doubt that this is the demon's plan to show them a glimmer of hope that they can win, only to plunge them into the very bottom of the depths of despair.

Helen cannot help but to admire the acting ability of Kurono that allows him to suggest this so naturally. It is likely that this is how he deceived Princess Nell.

But even though she understands this, she has no choice but to accept his suggestion. Either way, continuing to fight one-on-one will inevitably lead to defeat. In order to increase their chance of victory by even the most miniscule amount, they have no other choice but to attack with everything they have.

「... You are sure that this is fine? Since you have said that much, we cannot show you any mercy.」(Helen)

「Yeah, come at me as if you mean to kill me.」(Kurono)

As Kurono speaks with a calm expression that doesn't show the slightest sign of being prepared to die, the anger that had been dying down reignites.

「Everyone, ready yourselves! Prepare to charge!」(Helen)

With this Avalon-style battle command, the guards' fighting spirit that had been deteriorating returns in full force.

Even without Helen giving detailed orders, a battle formation is quickly prepared with those of the Knight and Swordsman classes at the front and the Archer and Mage classes at the back.

There are management cadets among the guards gathered here as well as those enrolled in the regular adventurer course. Naturally, they have no experience or training in fighting all together like this.

Even so, their battle formation has no flaws and in the blink of an eye, they have surrounded Kurono, ready to exterminate him. Each of them are displaying their exceptional skills.

Wooden swords are held firm. Incantations for offensive spells are loudly recited.

The arena is now saturated with mana and the intent to kill.

In the midst of this tense atmosphere, Helen, who is holding a staff with a fireball lit at its end, finally gives the command.

「Charge!」(Helen)

With vigor that is not at all inferior to that of real knights, the guards begin their violent attack – and in that moment, Kurono whispers a few words.

「Bullet Arts – Full Burst.」(Kurono)

Note from the author:

Kurono:「If you want to engage in close-quarters combat with me, get through this storm of bullets first! I'll be waiting for your challenge!」

This is the kind of muri-game* that this is.

TLN*: Literally means “impossible game”. Slang for an extremely difficult video game.

Chapter 360

「I suppose it didn't work out after all.」(Kurono)

The guards are lying on the ground around me after finally suffering a crushing defeat. It reminds me of the enemy soldiers that were completely slaughtered in the crossfire at Alzas Village. The guards are utterly motionless, just like corpses, but it's fine. I haven't killed any of them.

But just because they're not dead doesn't mean that everything is fine. My objective was to experiment with my new divine protections.

For now, I've managed to confirm that the third divine protection converts my black mana into the lightning element.

I'd thought I should keep things simple to begin with so I tried imbuing my magical projectiles with the lightning element, but the convenient added shocking effect allowed me to immobilize my opponents without spilling their blood was more useful than I'd expected. This would come in handy during quests requiring me to capture monsters alive or weaken them through paralysis. It even seems like it'll have various applications in real battles as well.

Incidentally, I've decided to name it『Shock Buster.』I've only used it to knock people unconscious so far, but if I use it for real, I'm sure it will release powerful, crackling electricity that will live up to the title of『Buster.』

Well, I wanted to test a lot of other things as well, but... I hadn't expected them to all be defeated by the Full Burst of my Bullet Arts.

「Th-this can't be...」(Helen)

No, there's one survivor. The captain of the guards named Helen, the enemy general.

She is wearing a desperate expression, as if she has encountered a Rank 5 monster in a Dungeon, and her body is trembling in a pitiful way. Doesn't this make me look like the bad guy here?

Well, whatever. All the other people were cleared out of the arena

beforehand. Nobody is watching, so no matter how much I look like an evil Tentacle Man who is about to assault this maiden, I don't care. I just did what I needed to do.

That's right, the fact that she is the only one left unscathed is not because of her ability or due to some coincidence. It's because I didn't fire any projectiles at her.

「Oi.」(Kurono)

「Hyih?!」(Helen)

After doing this much, my anger has completely subsided; in fact, I'm starting to feel sorry for the guards. But I harden my resolve and glare at Helen.

She's more frightened than a frog being glared at by a snake. She lets out a girlish scream and falls on her backside.

O-oi, I can see your panties a little. At least readjust your skirt, it's rolled up and now it's bothering me.

Incidentally, they're black.

「N-no... Stay away...」(Helen)

Doing my best to ignore the fact that I can see her panties, I manage to keep my eyes on her face as I step forward. That was close, I almost stepped on one of the students lying on the ground. It's troublesome, but I'd definitely feel bad if I kicked them out of the way.

「So, are you satisfied?」(Kurono)

I spit these words at Helen, who is thoroughly frightened and trembling like a small animal. Where has her previous spirit gone?

No, there's no way she can be feeling satisfied after a defeat like that, but I can't think of a better line to say. I definitely don't have the talent for making an ad-lib acting performance anyway.

「I'm going to explain myself, even though I think it's probably pointless. Nell purely thinks of me as a friend, and I think of her as my friend. That's why I haven't done anything to hurt her.」(Kurono)

I deliberately omit the fact that I got her involved in the dangerous business at Iskia.

「Either way, can you stop making unnecessary trouble out of the relationship between me and Nell?」(Kurono)

The important thing is to make this really clear.

Getting dragged into this stuff is troublesome, and more importantly, it's hard to deal with these harassment-like attacks.

And if even Lily and Fiona are affected, who knows what will happen. It's not the risk that I'll snap that I'm worried about, it's the risk that those two will snap.

「The next time you try something like this, it won't end with just a mock duel.」(Kurono)

Even I think this is a cliched threat, but under these circumstances, this is the best way to frighten her and make sure that she doesn't do anything like this again. I do feel anxious about this, but I can't think of any other ideas.

「Now then, Helen, I suppose I'll have you take responsibility for causing this mess as captain of the guards.」(Kurono)

Though I say this, it's not like I want her to pay me compensation or anything. I don't really want to become the kind of scum who would shout,「Show some sincerity!」at her until she pays up.

In short, I'm fine with a simple apology. Well, considering her appearance, I suppose it would be quite humiliating for her to lower her head to a hated enemy like me.

「... I-I understand.」(Helen)

Ah, her unreserved tone has changed to formal language. It's the same response I got from the skinhead called Zack that we captured before we hunted down the bandits. A noble family's daughter and a hooligan are both just humans when you're holding their life in your hands.

Even I was completely obedient to those masked guys in the research laboratory, so rather than making fun of her, I can feel her pain.

But this isn't the time to be sympathizing with her. I glare at her even more sharply, silently threatening her as if pressing her to hurry up and get on with it.

With a pale face, Helen finally begins to stand up unsteadily.

「... Kuh...」(Helen)

Surely she doesn't have any pride or anything left now. She makes no attempt to conceal or wipe the tears spilling from her blue eyes. Her stout-looking, elegant face is now heartbroken and stained with tears.

Do your best, Helen! Once you lower your head and apologize, that'll be it!

「U, uu... Fueeh...」(Helen)

And then she begins taking off her clothes.

First, the red cape that is the mark of a management cadet. Then the black vest. Now the red ribbon at the collar of her blouse is being undone.

What the hell is this girl doing?

Why would she take her clothes off here? Is it an Avalonian custom to be naked when making an apology? Even if it is, I can't make a girl do something like that. No, I wouldn't do that even to a guy, but – actually, if I don't stop her now, there will be no going back.

Her hands have already undone the top half of the buttons on her blouse. I can see white skin and a black bra peeking out at me from her exposed chest.

「Oi, what are you doing?!」(Kuroono)

As I shout at her, I grab her arms to force her to stop what she's doing.

「Kyah! N-no, don't rape me...」(Helen)

O-oi, what the hell is that response?! I'm trying to stop her out of my own goodwill, but now I look like a rapist attacking her, don't I?

Then what, was I supposed to stay quiet and nervously watch Helen strip?

「Uu, guh... Save me... Papa, Mama, Onii-sama...」(Helen)

As the girl in my arms really bursts into tears, I realize something.

Ah, I don't care about an apology or whatever anymore. If I don't get away

from her right now, I won't be able to control the situation.

I can't win against a crying girl after all –

「You should leave it at that, Berserker-san.」

At that moment, a voice calls out to me from overhead.

An unfamiliar girl's voice. I don't know anyone who would call me「Berserker-san.」

I almost reflexively look towards the spectator seats on the second floor of the arena where the voice is coming from, but I make a split-second decision to stop partway through my movement. This is dangerous, there's an incredible amount of bloodthirst, no, desire to fight.

「– ?!」(Kurono)

I thrust Helen away from me and throw my body in the direction that my instincts command me to.

I feel a slashing attack pass by my side at a fearsome speed. If I moved a fraction of a second later, it would probably have split my head open.

After rolling on the hard dirt to evade this attack, I quickly get up to prepare for a follow-up attack and confirm the situation. Standing in my field of vision is a young man holding a large wooden sword.

「Oh! It's amazing that you managed avoid that just now!」(Young man)

His face has a completely joyful expression that shows no signs of guilt for performing a surprise attack. I've seen it somewhere before.

I don't know whether his blonde hair is standing on end because he applies wax to it every morning or whether that's just how his hair is, but it's very unique so I remember it quickly.

Kai Est Galbraith. He's the swordsman who serves as a frontline fighter for『Wing Road』alongside Nero.

As I recognize who he is, I give a fleeting glance in the direction that the first voice came from.

The person standing there is a bespectacled girl with long, vividly purple hair

and a book in her hand. I've seen her somewhere before, too.

The genius Necromancer who is also a member of『Wing Road』, Safiel Maya Hydra.

I see. The fact that she's a Hydra means that the purple eyes shining behind her glasses have the『Amethyst Gaze.』It'll be bad if she glares at me.

But why are these two here? No, more importantly...

「What are you playing at, attacking me so suddenly?」(Kurono)

Safiel's expression changes to one of exasperation.

Standing on the spectator seats on the second floor, she leans forward and falls to the arena. No, she's come down of her own accord.

Just before she hits the ground, her body floats in the air unnaturally, allowing her to step lightly onto the arena.

She probably used wind magic to decelerate mid-air. On top of it being cast with no incantation, I didn't really feel any signs of mana being used. On top of that, her skirt didn't flip up at all, which means that her control over her spell was perfect.

「We're not playing at anything. We need to step in to help if one of our own female students is about to be raped, don't we?」(Safiel)

「... Huh?」(Kurono)

What kind of messed up things are you saying, what a terrible misunderstanding – before I can make such objections, I realize something.

The defeated guards. Their captain, an undoubtedly beautiful girl, with her disheveled uniform exposing much of her body.

Until just a moment ago, I was forcefully holding onto Helen's arms while she struggled. And she was crying earnestly while saying,「Save me」in a heartbroken voice.

Huh, from an outsider's perspective, aren't I the perfect example of a rapist?

「But the scenario where you go out of your way to violate the captain of the guards right before their eyes is quite exciting. You have talent.」(Safiel)

I don't know what to say. No matter what excuses I make, they won't believe me. Truthfully, Helen probably actually thought that I was attacking her.

This is how false accusations come to exist, isn't it...?

「Well, that's how it is, so that means it's fine for me to knock you out!」(Kai)

Kai points his wooden sword at me, looking and sounding truly delighted. Considering that his eyes look like those of a child with a toy that he wants in front of him, I guess he isn't being driven by a sense of justice that makes him want to punish me for my serious crime of sexual assault.

「You look like you're having quite a lot of fun. I thought you had a grudge towards me, though.」(Kurono)

「You mean about Nell? Hmm, I don't really know what happened with her, anyway.」(Kai)

Kai swings the wooden sword that is modeled after a wide greatsword, causing a whooshing sound. Strangely, I can tell from this action alone that this guy has gone through an incredible amount of swordsmanship training.

「It looks like things have gotten kind of troublesome, but it doesn't have anything to do with me and I'm not interested. I just want a fight with you, the guy who beat the Greed-Gore!」(Kai)

I see, this guy is a battle junkie just like that Vampire Samurai Ludora. Ah, he looks like a simple-minded guy, but because of that, it doesn't look like I'll be able to avoid a fight.

「Fine, I'll accept your challenge.」(Kurono)

I give a bold reply as if I want this battle as well, but considering the situation, this is the only answer I can give.

Well, whatever. Since Kai is holding a wooden sword, I can guess that he just wants to end this with a mock duel. If he really intended to kill me, he would be using his greatsword that's made of an Orichalcum-Mythril alloy. I feel a little more at ease knowing that my life isn't on the line.

And since he's a Rank 5 swordsman adventurer, he's not an unworthy opponent. This time for sure, I'll test out my divine protections as much as I

want.

There's more than a small chance that I'll just lose, though.

「Heh, you're the best! There's nobody else left in this academy who will accept a challenge from me!」(Kai)

He's boasting, no, I suppose that's just the simple truth. For a battle junkie like him, not having any opponents that he can use his full strength against must be the greatest sorrow. He's looking truly happy from the bottom of his heart.

Still, I can't stand the fact that I've been dragged into this by a misunderstanding.

「I think you know my name, but I'll say it anyway. I'm Kai Est Galbraith, a pure swordsman-class fighter!」(Kai)

「I'm the Nightmare Berserker, Kurono.」(Kurono)

Oh man, I finally said it. But with this atmosphere, I feel like I won't be allowed to introduce myself any other way. I guess things are probably heading in a direction where there's no going back...

「Well then, here I come! KURONOOOOOOOOO!」(Kai)

TLN: An author Q&A with reader questions follows. I've omitted the more irrelevant questions for English readers. The questions I've omitted: One asking about how some kanji are read, one asking why Orcs resemble Ogres in Chapter rather than the typical Japanese depictions of Orcs as having pig heads and one asking why he's been writing so many author's notes at the end recently. I could skim-read these questions and answers but properly translating them would have taken time and effort that's not really worth it for such irrelevant questions so I didn't.

Note from the author:

I will take the opportunity to answer some questions in the comments here.

Q: Were the guards at Iskia Fortress?

A: No. At the very least, the members who attacked Kurono in recent chapters were not there. As it has become clear that she was the classmate who spoke to

Nell in chapter 275, this proves chronologically that Helen was not present at Iskia (During this scene in the classroom, the students on the open-field exercise had already departed).

I believed that it could be assumed that all of the guards were those who stayed behind during the open-field exercise (The open-field exercise is an event that takes place multiple times and the students are divided, each only taking part in one exercise), so I didn't include it in the explanatory notes.

Q: In regards to the previous chapter:

She couldn't stop Nell's participation in the tournament involving terrible cursed weapons, nor could she stop Nell from using the『Scale of White Wings』, one of Avalon's national treasures, for Kurono's sake.

Isn't this line strange? This could be interpreted as Helen being aware of Nell's involvement in the tournament and that she would use the『Scale of White Wings』before the tournament itself.

A: I apologize for wording it ambiguously. Of course, Helen only learned about everything after the tournament.

Q: When did Helen find out about Nell's involvement in the tournament and her use of the『Scale of White Wings?』

A: The fact that Nell barged onto the arena during the tournament became news in Spada. Helen would naturally hear about it, and it is information that she would have learned if she made even the slightest effort to find out about it.

Also, the existence of the『Scale of White Wings』isn't secret information or anything like that. Just as Nero is known to use a sword, Nell is known to use a winged staff. Avalonians in particular would be aware of its abilities to some extent, and if Helen were to investigate the details of what happened at the tournament, she would quickly learn that the『Scale of White Wings』was used. This would mean that Helen learned the above information between the day after Nell clung onto Kurono's back and rode out of Spada and the day of the victory parade. This is plenty of time for her to gather information.

Q: Isn't "full burst" strange considering its meaning in shooting terminology?

A: Full Burst is a name that Kurono came up with on his own, not shooting terminology. Thank you to those who commented on this.

Chapter 363

After reluctantly parting with Kurono at the Stratus Smithing Workshop, Lily visits『Fairy Tail』, which has firmly established itself as her favorite store.

The person she has come to see is the beautiful Dark Elf, Sofia Sirius Percival, who serves as the chairman of the Royal Spada Academy.

Sofia, the matriarch of a large noble family, is wearing a humble yet elegant robe while Lily is wearing an academy uniform. The two of them might appear to be parent and child, but Sofia's dark skin and Lily's shining wings make it clear that they are of different races. Indeed, the two of them are simply friends.

The store is considerably packed with customers as it is lunchtime, but it's only natural for Lily, an honored customer, to be sitting in a reserved seat where she can place orders for secret information. The two of them were seated without being forced to wait, and they should have been elegantly enjoying a meal that has been handmade by Fairies.

「This incident was a blunder on my part...」(Sofia)

There is a dark expression of deep regret on Sofia's brown-skinned face. A truly bitter expression.

「There was no helping it; reinforcements wouldn't have made it to Iskia Fortress in time if it weren't for Kurono. It takes time to send out an emergency quest, and more importantly, it's impossible for you to make a move immediately since you're not a knight or adventurer, isn't it?」(Lily)

Lily's calm remark is proof that although her appearance remains young, her mind is in an adult state. Her wise words are right on the mark.

「No, but... Still...」(Sofia)

「I understand how you feel, the frustration of not being able to come to the rescue when someone you love is in trouble.」(Lily)

Sofia could not save Simon. That is her sole regret.

As Lily says, there was nothing that Sofia could have done in that situation. It would have been impossible for her to reach Iskia Fortress faster than the Knights' Order – no, faster than Kurono.

「Fortunately Simon is safe, and he isn't concerned that you didn't come to save him. In fact, something like that wouldn't even occur to him, would it?」
(Lily)

From Simon's point of view, his relationship with Sofia is nothing more than that between a student and headmaster. She was doing him favors as he took a break from attending the academy and worked as an adventurer, but it certainly cannot be said that they share a deep bond.

「It's not like he has lost faith in you or anything, so isn't it alright? The more important thing is what you should do from now on, isn't it?」(Lily)

As Lily gives a gentle smile, Sofia replies with a serious expression, as if she has hardened her resolve.

「Yes, that's why I've decided that it's time for me to make a move.」(Sofia)

「But is it alright to do that? It would be troublesome if the head of the Percival family, one of the Four Great Houses, were to act carelessly.」(Lily)

「I have made the necessary arrangements. No, those weren't even necessary. It would have been better for me and him to have been together from the beginning rather than waste time on worthless things like this. I can just freeze and break any troublesome people who try to get in the way.」(Sofia)

She exudes the spirit of a Rank 5 adventurer who is well-known even in the neighboring nation of Daidalos. Her crystal-blue eyes have a dangerous glint in them. Lily senses that they contain enough cold to freeze the entire store in an instant. She cannot help but sense it.

「Ufufu, it seems that my warning was unnecessary. I'm cheering for you, so if you have anything you want me to help you with, please let me know.」(Lily)

「Thank you. I feel bad for asking you for something right away, but I do have one favor to ask –」(Sofia)

「Simon will return to the dormitories tomorrow. Is it alright if I introduce you

then?」(Lily)

「It seems that you know everything.」(Sofia)

「I have a good understanding of what goes on inside the heart of a lost maiden.」(Lily)

The two friends laugh together. Maidens who are in love are beautiful indeed.

「Ah, that reminds me, I'll return the magic items that I borrowed. If you're going to make your move starting tomorrow, you'll need this ribbon and these glasses, won't you?」(Lily)

Returning the items of disguise that Lily and Fiona had used in Avalon to aid their acts of pure evil – or rather, their training, is one of the reasons Lily has met Sofia today.

The ribbon and hairband that change the color of the wearer's hair, and the glasses and contact lenses that change the color of the wearer's eyes. Each of these items are worth tens of millions of Klans.

「No, that won't be necessary. I've found the perfect thing, so I'll be using that.」(Sofia)

「You're amazingly confident. Is it really that good?」(Lily)

「Yes, they're my best clothes*. If I wear them, I could even face down a Rank 5 monster.」(Sofia)

TLN*: This is a term used for a woman's best clothes, like a special outfit, that's used for dates and stuff.

Even as Lily wonders if this is the correct way to use one's best clothes, she comes to the conclusion that it's probably fine if Sofia can say with such confidence.

「By the way, I have a favor to ask as well, would that be alright?」(Lily)

「Of course.」(Sofia)

As Sofia gives this happy response, Lily continues.

「I am going to buy a new bed, so I want you to recommend a good shop.」
(Lily)

Lily is currently a Rank 5 adventurer. She is free to go into the upper-class districts if she simply presents her Mythril-plate Guild Card. She can visit the high-quality stores that Sofia, a member of a great noble family, shops at herself.

「If you're going to be fussy over it, it would be best to have it made by a furniture craftsman, wouldn't it?」(Sofia)

「No, I need to replace my bed with a new one as soon as possible.」(Lily)

「You're in a hurry? Hmm, that dormitory was quite worn out, after all. Has one of the beds there broken? Or is it so dirty that you can't stand it anymore?」(Sofia)

Lily lets out a troubled sigh and gives a forced, fake smile that conceals the discomfort rising from the depths of her heart as she tells Sofia the reason she needs to purchase a bed.

「Yes, a winged insect landed on it and it's very dirty.」(Lily)

「Insects have appeared there? That is quite the disaster.」(Sofia)

「Yes, it must exterminated quickly...」(Lily)

TLN: Another case where singular and plural is vague in Japanese. Lily is obviously referring to a single insect but Sofia thinks that there are plural insects.

Those wings must be torn and scattered so that they will never buzz around Kurono again – Lily keeps these words hidden in the depths of her heart.

There is something that Fiona must do, even if it means refusing to share a wonderful lunchtime with Kurono.

「– So what kind of divine protection are you offering me?」(Fiona)

「You should find that out for yourself.」(Endymion)

As these were the words spoken by the black witch Endymion, Fiona still does not know what power is contained in the divine protection that has been granted to her.

Fiona had initially thought that there might be some meaning to keeping it a

secret, but seeing the goddess giving a large yawn right in front of her, she realized that the goddess simply found it too bothersome. It seemed that the goddess of witches really did things at her own pace.

「Rest assured; I have granted you the power* you need.」(Endymion)

These few words were the last thing that Fiona heard before returning from the purgatory world in her dream.

She was very doubtful as to whether she had even been granted a divine protection at all, but it showed itself in the battle at Iskia Village.

At the beginning of the battle, Fiona cast『Aur Soleil』at the incoming monster army.

Her prided, most powerful original spell. The Element Masters' most destructive flame spell, which even Kurono and Lily weren't capable of matching, should have drained Fiona of all her mana* after a single cast.

TLN*: As of this chapter, I'm now translating "magical power" as mana. I only translated it as magical power in previous chapters because the previous translator did, but it's been driving me crazy so I'm fixing the translation now.

Fiona did not collapse even after casting『Aur Soleil』at Iskia Village.

She did feel fatigue as her mana reserves dropped below half, but she didn't have any difficulty continuing to fight afterwards.

The divine protection either decreased the amount of mana required to cast her spell, increased the amount of mana she possesses or perhaps both. Its exact effects are still unknown, but Fiona immediately understood that this was the power of the divine protection.

However, there is no way that this basic enhancement that could be granted to anyone is the only effect of the divine protection of the black witch Endymion, a goddess so heavily involved with magic.

What Fiona was granted is the divine protection of an evil goddess as a result of offering many lives as sacrifices. There is no doubt that her body currently contains a more fearsome, terrible, extraordinary power.

But she doesn't know what that power is. In short, Fiona must confirm the

currently unknown powers of the divine protection as soon as possible.

There is no telling what kind of evil effect it may exhibit. That is why Fiona is heading for a place outside Spada, where no eyes will see her – or so she should have been.

「... Why am I in a place like this?」(Fiona)

Before Fiona knows it, she is sitting in a chair. There is a hand-cloth and a cup of hot tea that is letting out dense steam.

On the other side of the counter in front of her is a chef wearing cooking attire that she has never seen in Elysion or Spada, spiritedly shouting an order, 「One serving of tuna!」

This is a restaurant that has opened in Spada today which offers the famous traditional food of the nation of Rune. This store is commonly known by its nickname, the「Sushi* Store.」

TLN*: This isn't actually the Japanese word sushi, the food, but “sushii” in katakana. It does seem to refer to sushi though.

「Ahem, thank you all for coming to the Sushi Store,『Orwed』, today. Now then, we will begin the event to celebrate our opening, the Sushi-eating tournament!」(Chef)

The customers occupying every single seat in the store let out a cheer. Fiona looks around her as if she still can't process the current situation and takes a sip of the hot, pale-green tea.

The slightly astringent tea is something that she is tasting for the first time, but it isn't bad. Her gluttonous instincts tell her that it will taste much better when consumed together with a certain dish.

「The rules are simple; the person who eats the most sushi within the given time limit will be awarded 10,000,000 Klans and –」(Chef)

The chef standing at the center of the counter raises an old-looking book high in the air as he makes a declaration.

「– this precious, secret book written by Count Redwing himself that contains the essence of the culture of Rune!」(Chef)

Among the customers who are making noise once more, Fiona absentmindedly sips her tea as she tries to remember where she has heard Count Redwing's name before.

「However, this secret book is a copy, not the original. Don't get me wrong.」
(Chef)

As Fiona hears the disappointed voices coming from around her, she remembers.

Count Redwing was the nobleman from Rune, the foreigner who came from the other world known as Japan like Kurono. But he died over fifty years ago; it would be impossible to meet him now.

Kurono was saying something like that in a disappointed tone around the time they enrolled at the academy.

「... I wonder if Kurono-san would be happy if I brought this back for him as a souvenir.」(Fiona)

As if giving an answer to Fiona's whisper, her stomach lets out a growl.

Now that she thinks about it, it is lunchtime. She was seriously thinking about experimenting with her divine protection, but it was undoubtedly her body's honest instincts that led her to this place that seems as if would offer her delicious food.

The tea that she drank on an empty stomach stimulates her hunger further. Her stomach growls once more.

「The conditions are not bad.」(Fiona)

If there are any problems, it would be Fiona's gourmet rivals who have gathered here today.

With her serious, sleepy-looking face that shows as much caution as when she ventures into Dungeons, Fiona looks around at her surroundings once more.

「Gahaha, this is to celebrate my return from Iskia! I'm gonna eat as much sushi as I want and even take some prize money home!」(Gustav)

An enormous red Orc's loud voice fills the entire store. Fiona has seen him before; he was one of the adventurers defending Iskia Village.

「Jeez, I'm a vegetarian so there isn't a whole lot I can eat on the menu.」
(Douglalas)

「I-I can't, eat, eggs.」(Gon)

「Sushi with no wasabi, please.」(Zedra)

If Fiona recalls correctly, these are the members of the『Iron Demon Brigade』, a Rank 5 party of adventurers famous in Spada. All four of them have incredibly large bodies and one look at them told her that their appetites would be Rank 5 as well.

Still, the four of them look very cramped sitting in a single booth of the restaurant. An Orc, a Minotaur, a Cyclops and a Golem. It looks as if that booth has become a high-Rank Dungeon.

「Listen, Kai. We must obtain that secret book at all costs.」(Safiel)

「I know, Safi, just leave it to me!」(Kai)

Sitting on seats at the other end of the counter are Kai and Safiel, two members of the fated『Wing Road.』

Fiona can't see the other members. She guesses that these two are perhaps very intimate with each other.

「Still, it's unusual for you to want a book that's not an erotic book, Safi.」(Kai)

「I'll kill you and turn you into a servant. Shut up and start eating some sushi.」
(Safiel)

It seems that the theory of them being a couple is incorrect.

Nevertheless, Fiona knows that the swordsman called Kai is a mere human, yet possesses superhuman physical prowess equivalent to Kurono's.

In that case, he likely also possesses a superhuman appetite.

「It seems that I am surrounded by powerful enemies...」(Fiona)

As Fiona looks about at the banners around the inside of the store, she catches glimpses of others here and there with serious looks in their eyes, letting out an extraordinary presence.

This place is about to become a battlefield. Fiona braces herself.

「It's been a long time since I had some sushi~ I wonder which one I should have first!」

The adorable-looking boy wearing a males' academy uniform on the seat immediately to Fiona's right grins broadly as he stares at the menu.

Fiona feels a little pity for him.

No matter how she looks at him, this child who has black hair and red eyes resembling Kurono's is not the target of this eating competition. It is likely that he is just here to enjoy the taste of the Rune's cuisine.

However, the overeating party that is about to begin will produce an atmosphere where it will be impossible for him to leisurely enjoy his food.

「Even so, I will fight my own fight.」(Fiona)

Fiona steels her resolve, loosens the belt of her uniform a little and prepares for war.

「Now then, please place your orders!」(Chef)

「Kurono-san, give me your strength – Itadakimasu.」(Fiona)

Thus, a fierce battle begins.

Chapter 362

「Over-Accel.」(Kurono)

Time stops.

Everything in my field of vision freezes and becomes motionless, to the point that I feel like time has stopped.

The Greed-Gore, or rather, the Sloth-Gil, probably saw a static picture of the world like this as well. Seeing my magic bullets aimed at its eyes would have been easy for it.

This is the third divine protection. An ability that stops time – no, an ability that enhances my concentration.

I had Nell cast『Concentration Boost』on me in the battle at Iskia, but it was something that increased my ability to internally process spell formulas for magic.

If my ability to concentrate increases, I'll naturally be able to complete spells more quickly and it even becomes possible to construct multiple spell formulas simultaneously. To put it more simply, it increases my imaginative ability, making the images I create in my head more vivid and more precise, producing more refined spells.

The martial skill called『Concentration』, purely improves the concentration, reflexes and eye movement needed to read an enemy's movement while not affecting anything to do with dealing with complicated calculations.

This『Over-Accel』combines the effects of both the『Concentration Boost』spell and the『Concentration』martial skill, acting as the ultimate thought acceleration ability.

However, what I need right now is not only for my eyes to see the enemy's attack, but for my body to actually move to avoid it.

In this frozen scene, I can see the Mythril flamberge heading slowly but surely towards my neck. Silently doing nothing like this would be simply delaying my

inevitable death.

So I'll move. I'll avoid it. I'll push my strength as far as it can go, no, I'll overcome my body's limits.

「Move!」(Kurono)

I intend to shout, but my voice doesn't form an actual sound. I'm sure I'll hear it when I undo concentration-enhancing effect.

My body is as still as the rest of this frozen world, to the point that my vocal chords can't even vibrate. It's like sleep paralysis.

Even so, I force myself to move. I should be able to move. The Sloth-Gil controlling the Greed-Gore managed to do it.

I have to force my body to move using my super-fast nerve transmission that is greatly enhanced by the lightning element.

「Move!」(Kurono)

My body leans backwards just a tiny amount.

It's a stiff and awkward movement, as if every joint in my body has rusted, but it's still a movement.

There are less than ten centimeters between the blade and its target.

Not yet, this isn't enough. I still won't be able to avoid a deep slash to my Adam's apple at this rate.

Move, move more. I don't care if I need to collapse backwards. As long as I can evade this one attack, I can manage the rest!

「MOOOOOOOOOOVE!」(Kurono)

The world begins to move once more.

I hear my own shout echoing across the arena as I feel the dull pain of my back striking the hard ground.

I see a silver trail being drawn across the place my neck was a moment ago. Evasion successful.

「Grenade Burst.」(Kurono)

I can't see the Undead knight as I lie here face up, but it's still definitely right in front of me. If I fire at this point-blank distance, I'll definitely hit.

Eat this, my full-strength Grenade Burst that I prepared while evading your attack.

I launch a projectile containing black flames from the fingertips of my right hand towards the enemy that should be right there.

A huge explosion occurs right on top of me. My vision turns black and the world spins around me.

「— Whoa!」(Kurono)

The explosion is powerful enough to send my body flying away with ease, but my『Nanablast Amulet』blocks out the heat.

I fly through the air, trapped by the swirling air currents, but I don't have such weak nerves that I would panic over something like this.

I twist my body, regain my posture and make a landing before I crash into the wall like Kai did. I've landed with one knee on the ground. I suppose my landing wasn't all that magnificent.

「You surprised me. To think that you were able to avoid that.」(Safiel)

The explosion disperses just as I make my landing and face forward once more.

I hear the voice of the girl who called out to me earlier, coming from the other side of the faintly-lingering black smoke. The one actually standing in front of me is the skull-faced knight in Mythril armor, however.

「I didn't think that my attack would be blocked, either.」(Kurono)

The Grenade Burst that I unleashed as a counterattack after my evasion was blocked by the buckler attached to the knight's left arm.

It's a shield made of Mythril like the knight's sword and armor, but after being stained black by the explosion, it's lost its shine. If I look at it the other way, it's a sign that my explosion only managed to dirty it a little, dealing no damage at all.

I see. It's not just equipped with expensive equipment; it's got some pretty high specs to match that equipment.

No, I don't give a damn about that. There's something else that I should be worried about.

「So what exactly were you trying to do with that surprise attack?」(Kurono)

Jokes aside, Safiel Maya Hydra is the master of the Undead knight that unleashed an attack that could have really killed me. What is her true intention?

「You're the one who said to come at you as if we meant to kill you, aren't you?」(Safiel)

You idiot, those words were directed at Helen and Kai. You'd apply those words to yourself when in full spectator mode?

Well, considering that Safiel is smiling as if to say,「I'm very malicious, do you have a problem with that?」it's easy to tell that she's not being serious.

「If you murder someone at the academy, won't you be in a lot of trouble even if you're from a noble family?」(Kurono)

「To stop an evil rapist, to protect an important friend, there are plenty of excuses I can use.」(Safiel)

What a demon. I've been called a demon plenty by the Crusaders, but the ones who really deserve to be called demons are cunning people like her.

Even though I'm cursing her in my mind, there's no change to the fact that I look like the villain in this situation.

The annihilated guards and Helen, who is still crying in the corner of the arena right now. And Kai, who is lying on the ground, the Berserker's newest victim.

Uwah, this scene really is a nightmare.

「Well then, do you really intend to kill me here?」(Kurono)

「No, I'll stop here. Fighting you directly would be the act of a fool – Reverse.」(Safiel)

As if proving that she has no intent to fight anymore, Safiel unsummons her servant, the Undead knight.

A magic circle is drawn in purple right above the skull-faced knight's helmet. Poisonous-looking purple smoke appears from it. It wraps around the Mythrill armor and helmet as if it has a mind of its own, completely blocking out their silver light.

In the next moment, the smoke disappears into the magic circle as if sucked into it, and the Undead knight that was there is now suddenly gone. It's a strange unsummoning spell, as if the knight was dissolved in the smoke and sent beyond the magic circle with it.

But it's not the time to be admiring that.

「You nearly killed me. You think I'm just going to let you go because you said you don't intend to kill me anymore?」(Kurono)

「If someone sees you attacking a beautiful girl who isn't showing any resistance, it really will become something more than a simple misunderstanding, you know?」(Safiel)

「I see, misunderstanding, huh... You knew right from the beginning that I was innocent, didn't you?」(Kurono)

There was no reason for me to make excuses in the first place. Well, even if I'd wanted to try and make excuses, I didn't have the time to.

Still, she's pretty confident to be able to call herself a beautiful girl as if it's an obvious thing. Well, it's frustrating that I can't deny that it's true.

Keeping Safiel's beautiful face in the corner of my vision, I take a quick look at the area around the arena. As I thought, there's nobody here. There's no sign that there's going to be some new intruder appearing.

「Haven't you two been watching ever since these guys picked a fight with me?」(Kurono)

「We just came back to the school after finishing lunch. If we had been watching you from the beginning, that idiot would have jumped in before you annihilated the guards.」(Safiel)

「The timing of your arrival was pretty convenient, though.」(Kurono)

「The fact that Princess Nell's guards picked a fight with the Nightmare

Berserker has already caused quite a commotion.」(Safiel)

Eh, seriously? I almost give this response out loud, but manage to stop myself in time.

But I guess that's how it is; there's no way I can see what's going on outside from inside the colosseum. I was facing them one at a time at the start, so quite a lot of time has passed, too.

There are probably a lot of people who are free right now gathered around here, full of curiosity. If something were to happen, they'd rush in here straight away.

If it's become known that the guards picked a fight with me, then it seems that the misunderstanding should solve itself, but if I'm seen trying to make a serious attempt to kill Safiel, that would cause new problems. As unfortunate as it is, I can't do anything more here.

「Tell me the reason you tried to kill me.」(Kurono)

「Yes, I suppose it's alright to tell you that much –」(Safiel)

Safiel brushes aside her characteristic purple hair as she continues.

「– It's because you used the『Amethyst Gaze.』」(Safiel)

The Demon Eyes behind her glasses are gleaming dangerously... I think.

「It seems that the story being told to the world is that you beat the Greed-Gore to death with your bare hands, but what cut off its head was the crystallization effect of the『Amethyst Gaze.』That would be very clear if you were to have taken one look at the cross-section of the wound.」(Safiel)

I suppose I can't truthfully make an excuse and say that I didn't use it. Not that I think that such an excuse would fool this cunning Necromancer in the first place.

「So are you trying to say that your pride has been hurt by the fact that the prided Demon Eyes of the Hydra family were used by a mere adventurer?」(Kurono)

「Certainly not; there is no way that someone like myself would get so serious over something as worthless as a noble family's pride, is there?」(Safiel)

No, I have no idea what kind of person you are.

「I wonder if my explanation was a little insufficient. The problem lies not just with the fact that you used the Demon Eyes, but also with their original owner. Since you defeated him in the『Cursed Carnival』, you should at least know his name, right?」(Safiel)

The image of a screaming, insane man with shining Demon Eyes flashes in my mind. There's no way I could forget.

「You mean Saeed.」(Kurono)

Safiel gives a broad, evil grin, as if congratulating me in a condescending way for getting the right answer.

「I met Saeed-ojisan before. But it was only once, when I was only a child.」
(Safiel)

I see, so he was her uncle and she was his niece. It's only natural for them to be related in some way since they're both from the Hydra family, but I'd totally assumed that Saeed was someone who had lived in the distant past.

I don't know what the results would be if I had the Demon Eyes appraised, nor did I get a glimpse of the memories within them like I did for my cursed hatchet and Evil Eater.

However, I can say one thing with confidence.

「It's not like I killed him. By the time of my match, Saeed was nothing more than a severed Undead head.」(Kurono)

「I know. I know that he was tricked by a filthy prostitute, exiled from the clan and then killed by her, meeting a foolish end.」(Safiel)

Eh, Saeed's past had a story like that?! Uwah, what should I do, I really want to see the results of an appraisal for the Demon Eyes. I suppose I should give up on it...

「Then you should resent the woman responsible for that. It doesn't have anything to do with me.」(Kurono)

「Yes, you're right. I don't have any particular resentment towards you as an individual, but I can't stand the fact that you still possess Saeed-ojisan's Demon

Eyes.」(Safiel)

「I expended Saeed's Demon Eyes to defeat the Greed-Gore.」(Kurono)

The『Amethyst Gaze』that I shoved into the Greed-Gore's neck was lost. Physically, they were just a pair of eyes. There's no doubt that they were crushed by the Greed-Gore's rock-like body as it collapsed.

「Both eyes awakened for him. With that being the case, you have one eye remaining, don't you?」(Safiel)

Tch, I wasn't able to fool her after all.

Indeed, I still have one Demon Eye remaining in a jar in my Shadow Gate.

TLN: In chapter 342 I translated it as Kurono having used both eyes. The author made use of the fact that in Japanese, singular/plural objects are often impossible to distinguish unless specified so I (and all the other Japanese readers) had no way of being able to tell whether Kurono used one or both. I've now fixed it this in my translation for that chapter.

「If you were to willingly hand it over, I wouldn't mind letting you go here, you know?」(Safiel)

「Even if you had 10,000,000 Klans to pay me, I have no intentions of giving it to you.」(Kurono)

When I first acquired them, I'd thought that I'd be better off selling such dangerous things, but since one of the eyes played a huge role in my victory, I've changed my mind.

The Demon Eyes are dangerous but useful. They're so powerful that they might even work against the Apostles. You think I'm going to hand it over that easily?

「I see, what a shame. Well then, I'll be sure to target you at the next opportunity, so it would be helpful if you could let down your guard.」(Safiel)

She gives a dark smile so that I don't know whether to interpret her words as being serious or a joke. Seriously, spare me... As I begin to feel fed up with all of this, one doubt suddenly surfaces in my mind.

「That's quite the sense of duty you have, to be so obsessed about a relative

you met only once.」(Kurono)

She herself denied that she had the pride of a noble family, but this is how she's acting. Doesn't that mean that she kind of has strong feelings towards her own clan?

「Not really; even if you were to take the Demon Eyes from both of my parents, I wouldn't really think about taking them back.」(Safiel)

Safiel looks incredibly exasperated. It's not like she's letting out crystallizing beams of light from her eyes, but I feel an unpleasant sensation.

「You're quite dense, aren't you?」(Safiel)

「Huh? What are you saying all of a sudden?」(Kurono)

「Come to think of it, your party members are the famous Fairy and witch bishoujo combination... Fufu, you're going to go through hard times from now on, you know?」(Safiel)

「It's none of your concern.」(Kurono)

「Ufufu, well, it doesn't matter. If you're that thickheaded, I'll explain it for you clearly. Saeed-ojisan was –」(Safiel)

As Safiel speaks, she gives an incredibly happy smile, as if she's truly enjoying herself. Her face is undeniably that of a beautiful woman, but anyone looking at that smile wouldn't be able to help feel a『shadow』that causes them to shudder.

I can instinctively sense it. This girl is broken somewhere.

「– my first love.」(Safiel)

Honestly, the idea of wanting to own the eyeball of someone you love is a little repulsive to me. But now I understand.

As if there is nothing more left to say, Safiel turns her defenseless back towards me and begins to leave. I don't ask her any further questions.

There are some things that I'm curious about, like whether it's alright for her to just abandon Kai like this, but even so, I don't say anything to her. No, I can't say anything.

「Kuh... As I expected, using my divine protections three times consecutively was pretty rough...」(Kurono)

I can't move my arms; my joints are creaking and my vision is blurry. An easy victory for me has turned into a battle that I barely managed to win, and now my body is in a terrible state.

If some new intruder were to appear now, I would meet my doom.

Therefore, I only have one option right now.

「Right, I suppose I'll go home.」(Kurono)

Chapter 361

「Well then, here I come! KURONOOOOOOOOO!」(Kai)

Giving a spirited roar, Kai throws his wooden sword high into the air.

The ceiling is easily more than twenty meters above the arena, and the wooden sword spins loudly about halfway up that distance.

Before I can begin to wonder what the point of throwing his weapon away was, Kai springs up in a completely vertical direction. It's as if he's trying to catch up to the sword that he threw – actually, he's really caught up to it.

Seriously, he can reach a height of ten meters with a vertical jump? I don't know whether he's using a martial skill or it's a natural jump, but either way, it's clear that he's more agile than I am.

The moment the restrictions of gravity take hold of the thrown sword and it begins its descent towards the ground, Kai grips its handle once more.

「Break Impact!」(Kai)

The martial skill he unleashes adds the force of gravity to his attack as he attacks from above like a meteor.

Couldn't he have just jumped while holding his sword without having to throw it...? It's not the time to be thinking about that. No matter how I look at it, this attack contains a lot of power; it would be dangerous to receive a direct hit.

My only option is to evade – but I've just noticed something. One of the collapsed guards is lying right at my feet.

The man, who is lying completely motionless, is wearing the uniform of a knight cadet and still tightly grasping his wooden sword.

This is bad. If I avoid this attack, it'll land right on this guy. Even if it's not a direct hit, there's no doubt that he'll at least get caught up in the shockwave.

That『Break Impact』is probably a superior version of the Break technique that the Armored Knights were using at the battle of Alzas. It's not difficult to

imagine that it'll release quite a shockwave when it hits the ground.

Then I suppose I'll evade it while carrying this guy.

No, there's no way I have time to do that. Kai's martial skill will land right on top of my head just as I pick the guy up.

Damn it, there's no choice but to take the attack head-on and reduce its power as much as possible!

「Blackening!」(Kurono)

I'm still holding the normal-sized wooden sword that I randomly chose for the duel. I cleaned them all up with just『Shock Buster』so I didn't use Blackening, but damn, I suppose I should have finished things more quickly.

Even while I internally complain to myself, I raise my wooden sword to stop Kai's as it flies towards me. I really don't know how, but somehow my Blackening completes in that instant.

「Guh!」(Kurono)

Kai's attack is powerful, as if telling me that he doesn't need to feint and simply plans to beat me down with raw strength, and I stop it with this unreliable, Blackened wooden sword.

As I feel a tremendous amount of pressure on both of my arms, I also hear the sound that I expected to hear, the creaking sound of my weapon being destroyed.

Damn it, I didn't manage to block it completely after all.

Clicking my tongue mentally, I endure the impact that shakes my entire body. Kai's martial skill smashes my wooden sword, strikes the ground and releases a shockwave. The male student I covered hasn't been blown away too far. Great. He just rolled across the ground a little, so he should be fine.

「Bullet Arts – Shock Buster.」(Kurono)

I was preparing my counterattack while using my Blackening. Full Burst would be impossible, but it is possible to release enough bullets to fill the air so densely that there isn't any space to dodge them at point-blank distance.

On top of that, all of them have the lightning element added to them through『Shock Buster.』The space between the barrage of bullets is filled with purple lightning. Just like a net of electricity.

Kai, whose body is rigid after releasing his martial skill, has no technique that can dodge or block this.

「Oh?!」(Kai)

My magic bullets of electricity travel the minimal distance of less than one meter and all strike his broad chest. The impact sends his large, muscular body flying away with ease.

Of course, electrical attacks cause numbness. If the lightning is strong enough, it is possible that『Paralysis』is inflicted as a Status Effect. Yes, just like the Greed-Gore did to me.

In any case, my『Shock Buster』doesn't have the power or spell formula necessary to inflict『Paralysis』, but surely Kai's limbs will be feeling numb after receiving such a spectacular critical hit.

In other words, he is falling onto the arena without being able to put up any kind of defense –

「Tweh! Uhegh... I didn't think that I'd be receiving a lightning attack when Sharl's not around.」(Kai)

Kai lands on the ground casually and magnificently, like a gymnast. His control over his body is incredible, as if being blown away by my attack was just an act. He has agility equivalent to that of a War Cat.

No, the thing I should be surprised about is his toughness. His resistance to Status Effects is as good as mine, even though I have a remodeled body. Or maybe he trains by receiving a lot of lightning attacks on a regular basis.

「But is this that black magic thing? Heh, it's not all that great.」(Kai)

Ah, he's wearing an expression that tells me that he thinks my black magic is simple. It kind of annoys me. Should I give him a『Grenade Burst』from『Overdrive?』

Wait, calm down, me. Don't forget your original goal. You haven't tested out

your new divine protections yet, so you can bring this match to an end later.

No, that's not right; the match will be decided in a single moment.

「I guess a sword is best for a Berserker after all! Hey, your sword's broken, so I don't mind waiting for you to get another one, you know?」(Kai)

「No, I don't need it. Monsters don't wait for you to pick up your weapon, after all.」(Kurono)

「Heh, just what I'd expect from the guy who killed the Greed-Gore with his bare hands. What amazing confidence!」(Kai)

No, truthfully, I'm really anxious about the fact that I don't have my cursed weapons on me.

But I have to give these kinds of responses. These are necessary words to get Kai in the mood.

Because there's no point if he doesn't keep using attacks that he puts all of his strength into.

「Ah, don't let your guard down just because I'm unarmed. Come at me as if you mean to kill me.」(Kurono)

They're the exact same words I said to Helen, a line that easily provokes. She got really angry, but –

「FINE BY ME!」(Kai)

Kai seems really happy. Ah, I suppose he's really battle-crazed after all.

He brandishes his enormous wooden sword and steps forward with enough force that the ground sinks beneath his foot before breaking off into a run. He's so fast that I almost lose sight of him. It takes him only two steps to reach his top speed.

「Bullet Arts.」(Kurono)

He'll be suspicious if I just stand here silently. I have no doubt that he's the type of person who makes decisions based on instinct rather than deduce things through logical thinking.

If I hold back even a little, he'll realize something is going on.

That's why I'll fire distracting projectiles at full power. I'll use Gatling Burst.

「I've already shown you that those have no effect, haven't I?!」(Kai)

I know. I know that, but I hadn't expected you to charge in like that completely unguarded.

Without forgetting that this is a mock battle, I use soft projectiles that will simply make a forceful impact if they hit rather than the usual pseudo-Fullmetal Jacket projectiles.

However, they're still enough to knock a person out if they hit their head. Several hundred of them were enough to stop even the Rank 4 adventurer Vulcan in his tracks.

Despite that, this guy is pushing on quickly and forcefully, as if this storm of bullets is actually simply made of raindrops.

As expected of someone who is Rank 5, he's tough.

「Grenade Burst.」(Kurono)

「That was close!」(Kai)

A single red explosive projectile emerges behind the hail of rapidly-fired black bullets. Its size and the power hidden within it are on another level, so it's not really hidden among the bullets, however.

But it seems that even Kai would choose to evade this projectile.

Still, I fired almost without making a single movement, but he reacted super-quickly as if he knew exactly when I was going to fire it. And above all, his body is incredible for being able to react as fast as his mind.

The direction of his movement turned ninety degrees while maintaining full speed.

The Grenade that missed its target sails through the air until it finally collides with the arena's wall.

「That one gave me the chills!」(Kai)

With an explosive sound echoing through the arena and a black-red explosion in the background, Kai shouts these words as he returns to his previous course

of movement.

If he takes three more steps from there, his wooden sword will reach me. The genius swordsman is stepping into lethal range.

「Don't let it end like this –」(Kai)

My final discharge. I seriously used the pseudo-Fullmetal Jacket for this one shot, but as expected, it's being dodged.

The magic bullet sails fruitlessly over Kai's head as he bends his body down slightly.

Maybe it was easier to sense because of the small amount of killing intent I put into it.

It's such a perfect evasion that even I can't help but admire it. It's not just that he's dodged it; it's incredible that he simultaneously moved his body into a position that leads into his incoming attack.

That's right, Kai is finally releasing an attack that I'm satisfied with. A martial skill so powerful that I'm praying that it won't end things here.

「Ultima Slash!」(Kai)

A single, sweeping attack. I can't see the tip of his weapon due to its speed, but the mana imbued in the martial skill forms a swiftly-trailing aura behind the weapon.

Unlike my Kuronagi, the piercing light that is the color of an ocean reflecting sunlight is fascinatingly beautiful.

But this beautiful attack is enough to knock someone out. Actually, even with a wooden sword, I'm pretty sure this would kill an ordinary person with ease, wouldn't it?

Ah, damn it, this is scary after all. Even though this is what I wanted, taking such a dangerous-looking attack completely unguarded is terrifying.

But I don't have any other choice; this is necessary to test my second divine protection.

The first divine protection,『Overdrive』, grants me physical strength. And the

second divine protection –

「Overgear.」(Kurono)

TLN*: The kanji for Overgear is “Demon King of Iron.” As a reminder, Overdrive was “Demon King of Flames.”

Grants me an iron-like defense. In other words, it’s a hardening ability.

There are basic defensive measures such as the『Protect Boost』spell or the martial skill,『Guard.』Both of them basically work by covering the entire body with mana to harden it, and the second divine protection I’m using now relies on the same principle.

However, the difference between it and the other defensive measures is like the difference between the sky and the earth. And because its effect is so simple, it’s extraordinarily easy to use.

The pseudo-earth-element black mana turns into a visible gray aura that surrounds me for only a moment.

It takes a moment to cast and another moment to exhibit its effect. But that’s fast enough to block this attack.

「– HUH?!」(Kai)

As Kai lets out a shout of astonishment, it’s drowned out by the deafening noise of the wooden sword being smashed to pieces as it strikes my chest.

No matter how powerful the martial skill is, if the weapon itself is weak, it’s only natural that it would be destroyed. No matter how hard you try, you can’t break a boulder with a wooden sword.

My body has transformed into steel even harder than a boulder, so this is the natural result. I’ve taken no damage. In fact, I didn’t feel any impact at all.

But I’m really glad it worked – ah, I don’t have time to be celebrating.

The moment after Kai’s weapon is destroyed is when he has a fatal opening that will never appear again if I let him escape here. I’ll hit him with all of my strength here to decide the match.

「Overdrive.」(Kurono)

The crimson magic circle that has appeared on the back of my hand grants me the strength of an enraged Wrath-Pun.

「Clench your teeth –」(Kurono)

Burning red and destructive black. As my right arm draws a faint spiral of these two colors, it closes in on Kai's defenseless body.

Using『Wrath Impact』would kill him. But『Overdrive』should give me more than enough strength to knock Kai out.

「ORAAAH!」(Kurono)

I feel my attack connect. At that moment, my fist extends in a straight punch thrown with all my might.

And then Kai's body, which is right in front of me, vanishes. Without even letting out a groan, he's been sent flying all the way to the back of the arena at an incredible speed.

There should have been twenty meters between us and the wall behind him, but he travels that distance without slowing down and crashes into the wall. Kai's back sinks into the gray wall that's made of an inorganic, concrete-like substance.

The roaring sound echoing in the arena and the deep fissures running along the wall's surface show just how powerful the impact was.

「... Are you going to keep going?」(Kurono)

One second, two seconds, three seconds pass – there's no response.

Gravity pulls Kai's body that is half-buried in the wall to the ground, where he finally collapses. He sinks onto the ground without being able to move his arms at all, let alone put up a defensive stance.

「I suppose I'm the winner of this match.」(Kurono)

He seems to be completely unconscious, so I don't think he can hear me, though.

My experiment disguised as a contest has finished. It's unfortunate that I didn't manage to test out my third divine protection, but I suppose I'll just have

to look for another opportunity for that.

Just as I begin to relax –

A chill runs down my spine and the alarm bells of my sixth sense go off.

This is killing intent.

「-?!」(Kurono)

By the time I turn around reflexively, I see the tip of a blade that's already right in front of my eyes.

A sword radiating a dazzling silver light. Its blade curves in a wave-like shape. It's a flamberge made of Pure Mythril. Unlike a wooden sword, it will bring death to anyone cut by it.

The one swinging this beautiful sword is a knight wearing a suit of armor and helmet radiating the same silver light.

The full-platemail that covers him head to toe in Mythril has a streamlined shape and purple decorations everywhere. What a beautiful design.

However, the face visible through the helmet that has its beak-shaped visor raised is not that of a handsome man befitting of such armor, but a skull that looks like it belongs to a grim reaper. The purple light in its eye sockets serve as proof of the false life that moves this dead body.

That's right, this is an Undead knight being controlled through『Necromancy.』

Just because I've figured out its identity doesn't mean that its attack is going to stop. The timing of this attack is just too perfect.

This horizontal swing aimed at my neck isn't slow enough that I'll be able to duck under it in time. The reach of this gleaming Mythril blade isn't short enough for me to escape it with a back-step.

The second divine protection,『Overgear』, is... impossible; I won't be able to use it for a second time quickly enough.

My cursed weapons aren't present and I'm not wearing my demon's coat. There's nothing I can do – no, there is only one thing I can do.

Perhaps even this danger is something that has been prepared for me. This

situation is so perfect that I can't help but suspect this.

It's perfect for testing my third divine protection.

「Over-Accel.」(Kurono)

I activate it – and as I do, time stops.

TLN: Kanji for Over-Accel is “Demon King of Lightning”.

Chapter 364

「I'm back, Kurono-san.」(Fiona)

「Ah, welcome back, Fiona.」(Kurono)

I welcome Fiona back to the dormitory nonchalantly, but on the inside, I'm breaking out into a cold sweat.

My body is still being tormented by the aftereffects of using the three divine protections,『Overdrive』,『Overgear』and『Over-Accel』, in quick succession.

The reason I managed to make it safely back to the dormitory is because the moment I was seen by the curious onlookers who had gathered around the arena, they parted to open a path for me to walk through.

It's the same phenomenon that occurred at the victory party, but this time I was thankful for it. If someone had gotten in my way unnecessarily, I would probably have collapsed pathetically in front of everyone.

I somehow managed to endure the desire to collapse until I made it to my bed, and after that, I devoted myself to resting until now. In other words, I slept. The pain I felt after waking up is similar to muscular pain felt the day after performing excessive exercise, I suppose.

Well I guess this is how it is in the beginning. Even for『Overdrive』, this is only the second time I've used it.

Even if they are divine protections, simply receiving them from the god isn't the end of it. Making full use of them requires just as much practice as martial skills and magic.

「Kurono-san, are you looking a little pale?」(Fiona)

It seems that my suffering is showing on my face to the point that it can be seen right away.

My quarrel with the guards is a problem that I'd like to keep hidden of possible. If those guys refuse to change their behavior and keep coming after me in the future, I'll consult Fiona and Lily so that I can deal with them

appropriately. But if it ends with just today's incident, I should refrain from causing a fuss and making them worry unnecessarily.

Well, I suppose it's still best to tell them about Safiel who actually came to that place to kill me, though.

In any case, I'll be making a policy of deceiving them by magnificently ignoring the details about our duel.

「No, I'm just a little tired from attending lessons for the first time in a while. More importantly, Fiona, aren't you looking pale?」(Kurono)

This change of conversation isn't something that I randomly chose on the spot. Fiona really looks pale to me.

Well, to a complete stranger, it would appear as if she simply has her usual sleepy, blank expression, but I was able to notice this unusual change in her appearance.

「As embarrassing as it is, I ate a little too much.」(Fiona)

「... Umm, is this the part where I'm supposed to laugh?」(Kurono)

「No, as disappointing as it is, it is the truth.」(Fiona)

A shocking revelation that makes me want to shout, "W-what did you say?!" To think that Fiona could feel ill from eating too much.

「How could that happen, did you just eat something that tasted that bad?」(Kurono)

「No, I ate a very delicious food called Sushi.」(Fiona)

「You ate sushi?!」(Kurono)

TLN: Everyone but Kurono is incorrectly pronouncing the word "sushi" as "sushii", including when the store is referred to as the "sushi store". I will capitalize Sushi in these cases.

I'm really jealous. I should have abandoned the idea of seriously attending my lessons and followed Fiona. My casual return to the school only caused the guards to pick a fight with me, after all.

Come to think of it, I completely missed my chance to eat lunch. Instead of

having a feast at the school cafeteria, I skipped out on a meal... Damn it, now that I've realized this, I've started to feel hungry.

「There was an eating competition to celebrate the store's opening, so I got a little fired up.」(Fiona)

I see, which is why she couldn't put on the brakes.

「Since it's you, Fiona, you won easily, right?」(Kurono)

「I did win. However...」(Fiona)

In this moment, a shadow has appeared on Fiona's face. Could it be that she was only able to eat sushi without wasabi and made to suffer in some kind of childish, embarrassing way?

「The victory was handed over to me.」(Fiona)

And so Fiona begins to tell the full story of the Sushi-eating competition that celebrated the opening of the Spada branch of the Sushi store『Orwed』–

Piles of small dishes extending towards the ceiling. Groans of suffering rising from everywhere. Constantly occupied toilets.

The Sushi-eating competition is reaching its climax.

「Sorry, Safi...」(Kai)

「Don't give up, keep eating. Eat even if it kills you. It's fine, I'll make you able to keep eating even if you die.」(Safiel)

「No, really... It's seriously impossible, so... Gefuh.」(Kai)

The tower of small plates stacked on the table prove that Kai Est Galbraith does indeed have a superhuman appetite to match his superhuman physical abilities despite having only a human's body. However, his efforts are in vain and he tragically drops out of the competition.

「S no good... s' really no good... I've lost this 'un.」(Gustav)

Gustav, whose name was at the top of the list of favorites to win the competition, utters clear words of defeat on the verge of the time limit's expiry.

The booth was already completely filled to begin with, but everyone except the Golem have filled up their stomachs and expanded their volumes even

more.

Will they be able to get out of their seats? This is a great question that has yet to be answered, but the attention of the spectators, including competitors who have already dropped out, is focused on the two individuals sitting at the counter.

「... Negitoro*, please.」(Fiona)

TLN*: Negitoro is a kind of sushi with fatty tuna meat minced/turned into a paste, put on a bed of rice and spring onions added on top.

One of them is a beautiful young woman wearing the uniform of the Royal Spada Academy, Fiona.

Her expression would cause those looking upon it to think that she needs to address her need for sleep more urgently than her hunger, but her mouth doesn't stop moving for even an instant.

The way she eats her prey (the sushi) is enough to make people think that perhaps it is being thrown into another Dimension rather than going into her stomach. It is overwhelming to the point that even the genius swordsman of『Wing Road』and the leader of the『Iron Demon Brigade』cannot compete, let alone regular people who simply boast that they have large appetites.

However, there is one other individual here who is able to keep up with her incredible eating.

「Ah, well then, I'll have the same without the wasabi.」

This person's black blazer is proof that he attends the academy like Fiona. However, his age is clearly lower, to the point that he could be assumed to be of the absolute minimum age required to enroll at the academy. This child is the ultimate rival in this competition.

Fiona moves the negitoro into her mouth indifferently with a blank expression, still managing to make this action seem somewhat elegant. Meanwhile, the unnamed child smacks his lips as he enjoys the taste of the negitoro's paste with the same innocent smile that he was wearing at the start of the competition.

Incidentally, negitoro is a sushi dish made using negi, a vegetable that is a specialty of Rune, and the minced meat of a large Rank 2 fish-monster known as a Troll Fish.*

TLN*: Okay, there's a little bit of an author's joke to be had here. "Negi" is the Japanese word for spring onion, but the other half of negitoro's name is supposed to come from "toro" which means "fatty cut", often used in reference to tuna belly. But in the Chapter world, the "toro" comes from "Troll Fish" (トロフィッシュ/tororufisshu), because the first two katakana are "トロ/toro".

The competition unfolds as a dead heat. The two of them are taking turns on the offense and defense, possessing completely identical appetites – or so it may appear to the spectators, but Fiona finds this difficult to believe.

At this rate... I will lose.

Fiona elegantly throws the negitoro into her mouth with her gloomy eyes giving off a mysterious aura, but on the inside, she can feel that she is reaching her limit.

「Hmm~ What should I eat next... I'll go with tuna, back to what I had at the start! With no wasabi!」

Meanwhile, her rival sitting next to her places his original order of tuna as he has already done countless times, as if this is his first meal of the day.

Rather than the child simply appearing to be composed, it almost looks like an illusion where time is constantly rewinding back to the start of the competition for only this child.

Fiona has encountered several individuals who can match her appetite in the past, but this is the first time that she feels such a difference between her and her foe. The sight of the child's delighted, small cheeks stuffed full of tuna even causes shudders of fear to run through Fiona's body.

I'm sorry, Kurono-san... For me, this child is...

At the moment that Fiona gives up –

「Hmm, I have to stop here, or else... Well then, I'll have a custard pudding for dessert.」

Suddenly, the child declares that he is placing his last order.

Has he become full? Impossible; he clearly has room to spare but has chosen to suspend his meal of his own accord. In other words, he is moderating his own eating.

「I'm terribly sorry, but custard puddings are only sold at our main branch in Rune.」

His last order has unexpectedly failed.

His eyebrows form a sad-looking figure 8* and his expression looks as if tears will spill from his red eyes at any moment, but it seems that this hasn't changed his decision.

TLN*: The kanji for the number 8 is 八

「Thank you for the meal!」

Somewhat in despair, he takes out a wallet in the shape of a deformed Silent Sheep from his breast pocket. It opens with a stiff noise and he scatters Elroad Coins that shine to the point of being blinding across the counter.

The fact that he has clearly overpaid his bill with these dozens of gold coins is enough to make some of the employees and spectators gasp.

「Custard pudding...」

The child leaves the store, turning to look back regretfully several times along the way.

「Two orders of tuna, please.」(Fiona)

Thus, Fiona's victory was secured.

「— That is what happened. I am unable to proudly say that I was victorious.」
(Fiona)

「Wow, I guess there are some amazing children out there.」(Kurono)

With Fiona's story, all we know is that the boy with the overwhelming appetite was wearing an academy uniform, but in this case, I couldn't care less about that child's personal details.

It's just that I'm surprised by the fact that there's a child who can match

Fiona's appetite.

「Yes, I am sure that like me, he has a constitution that causes his food to be mostly absorbed as mana.」(Fiona)

The secret behind Fiona's appetite is finally revealed. I'd thought that she was just a thin person who eats a lot, but I see now, she absorbs food as mana.

Strictly speaking, all creatures of this world absorb both nutrients and mana from food. Mana generally recovers in the same way that stamina does. A tasty meal and a good night's sleep is probably enough to fully recover one's mana.

However, if there are any individual differences, they lie in the constitutions that people are born with.

「Well, there is no doubt that that child possesses a greater constitution for absorbing mana.」(Fiona)

「But still, a win is a win. Aren't you glad you managed to win?」(Kurono)

Before I know it, I'm patting Fiona's head as if praising and comforting her. The texture of her characteristic light-blue hair is just as pleasant as Lily's blonde hair. Silky smooth hair that flows between the fingertips, hair that any woman would envy – as my thoughts begin to resemble a shampoo commercial, I realize what I'm doing.

「U-umm, Kurono-san... This is, you know...」(Fiona)

But I've realized a moment too late. No, it was already too late the moment I reached out with my hand.

Fiona looks down with embarrassment on her face that even a stranger would be able to see, voicing her protests.

No, there aren't any words of clear rejection among the sentences coming from her mouth, but I'm not thickheaded enough to miss the nuances that mean, 'It's embarrassing so stop it'.

It's time to remove my hand and panic as I try to come up with an excuse.

「Err, sorry, I wasn't thinking.」(Kurono)

I couldn't even make an excuse. It seems that I have no talent for tricks such

as dodging topics with eloquent speech.

But as Fiona looked genuinely frustrated at the fact that the victory was handed over to her at the eating competition, she had a childlike cuteness that really made me want to pat her head. To the point that I would say,「there, there」without even thinking.

Well, I don't have the courage to honestly admit that. Sorry for treating you like a child, Fiona. It seems that only the child-form Lily would allow this, after all.

「No... It isn't that I disliked it...」(Fiona)

Seeing Fiona fidget as she looks the other way, I feel the urge to pat her again. But control yourself, you must control yourself, Kurono.

She's been considerate enough to forgive me and say that she didn't mind it. I'm not going to do something as foolish as willingly stepping on a landmine.

As I deal with this inner conflict, a strange silence passes between me and Fiona.

Th-this is a little awkward. Isn't there some kind of sensational conversation topic that will get rid of this situation –

「Umm, Kurono-san, I actually received a rare book as a prize for winning the eating competition.」(Fiona)

「O-oh! Please show me that book!」(Kurono)

Fiona takes a single book from the Dimensional pouch that she had when we went on our date.

It's roughly A4-sized. The deep red binding has faded a little; it certainly is in a state where it would be called an old book.

It's just like the grimoire that Fiona borrowed for me from the library – no, it really might be a grimoire. This book's appearance is enough to make me think that this is the case.

「This book is apparently the secret book in which Count Redwing, someone from a foreign world like you, Kurono-san, wrote the essence of Rune's culture. It is indeed written in mysterious letters that I have never seen before, so I was

unable to decipher any of it.」(Fiona)

「... No, that's not right. This is no secret book.」(Kurono)

I make this declaration immediately after seeing the string of characters dancing on the front cover.

「As I thought, Kurono-san, you can read this, can't you?」(Fiona)

Fiona looks at me with an expression as if to say that she did expect this but is still unable to hide her surprise. I return a dead-serious stare as I answer.

「Yeah. This is... a diary.」(Kurono)

That's right, I can indeed read the writing that Fiona refers to as「mysterious letters.」The book's title that is written on the front cover in large letters is written in genuine Japanese characters.

Hiragana, katakana, kanji. This is the first Japanese sentence that I've seen since being summoned to this world, but there's no way that I could forget how to read this language. I understand its meaning and even the tricky nuances hidden within it.

This is the book's title.

「It is now that I, Count Zenichi Theo Redwing, will reveal the record of my secret memories! It contains things about my ex-girlfriend, so don't tell my wife!」

Chapter 365

Note from the translator:

The tense in this chapter is a bit whacky, but the vast majority of it is narrated in a present tense style so I did that for the most part, and switched to past tense for bits that were appropriate.

Yoshi

My name is Akabane* Zenichi, a normal student you could find anywhere – or at least, I was supposed to be.

TLN*: Literally means “red wing”.

「... Where is this place?」

A white space lit up blindingly brightly. However, it is very clear that this is not my own room nor the school infirmary.

The reason I know this is because the place my body has been lying horizontally until now is not a soft bed, but a bathtub filled with lukewarm water. It has quite an angular shape and looks just like a coffin, but it still has a stylish feel to it in its own sort of way, doesn't it? Not that I would want one in my house.

This pointlessly spacious room is lined with bathtubs identical to the one that I was submerged in. Quite the original idea for a bathroom.

By the way, when I became conscious, I raised the upper half of my body, leaving only my lower half in the bathtub. Of course, because I've been submerged in water, I'm nude.

This is bad, I'll definitely catch a cold at this rate... No, I really can't process the current situation.

「Calm down, I'm not old enough to be growing senile... Try to remember what happened today...」

According to my memory, today's date is the 14th of May. The fated Monday that comes for students after they spend their weekends working at part-time

jobs.

However, for me, this is the Monday I have been eagerly awaiting, in other words, the day I attend my university.

The reason for that is because I have a beautiful girlfriend. She transcends the number one position for cuteness in the world, and I am very, very proud of her.

A miraculously pretty face that suits black twin-tails even after she has become a university student. A small, delicate body that any man would feel a desire to protect. She is such a sweet, fragile girl, but she possesses courage and purity that drives her to make an obento just for me. A truly ideal girlfriend.

She is far too good a girlfriend for someone like me, but even so, a girlfriend is a girlfriend!

That's right, that's why I went to university today, looking forward to her handmade obento. Lectures? I don't care about those; I did attend them but I have no recollection of their contents whatsoever. I could not care less.

And then comes the long-awaited lunch break. Our meeting place is a suitable classroom somewhere in the university. We usually spend our wonderful lunchtimes in a secret place outside that only the two of us know about, but today, rain is pouring down as if to curse our destined love.

Well, it does not change the fact that I can eat her handmade obento, so it is a trivial matter.

「Here, Zenichi-kun.」

And as I open the obento that my girlfriend offers with her usual doll-like, expressionless face, yet another disaster befalls me.

「Th-this is...」

The entire obento is brown. Its contents tell me that no attention has been paid to its colors or nutritional balance, possessing only the intent of simply feeding a starving male student.

How strange. What she normally makes is a heart drawn on top of a bed of rice using mysterious pink flakes, an obento that is an incredibly straightforward

sign of affection.

She does not skimp on the side dishes; using frozen food is out of the question. On top of being concerned about the colors and nutritional balance, she is also fussy over how it appears. Wieners are turned into octopuses while apples are turned into rabbits.

And yet, what I can feel from the food in front of me is not love, but a sense of obligation, as if to say, 「I only made this because I had to.」

Could it be that she is planning to break up with me today...?

「I-I'm sorry, it seems that my mother made a mistake and handed me my brother's one...」

And then she unexpectedly follows up with some panicked words.

I see, she lives with her parents, and I have also heard before that she has a younger brother whose appearance causes those around him to misunderstand him, though he's a good child at heart.

With the chaos that happens in the morning, these kinds of mistakes and accidents can happen from time to time, I suppose.

「Oh no, if that's the case then it can't be helped, and I'm not bothered!」

If there were not such circumstances that I could understand, in the next moment I might have been crying. Joking aside, I would really cry.

「By the way, is it alright for me to eat this obento?」

「Y-yes... I only want Zenichi-kun to eat things that I've made, but... it's okay.」

To me, the words she says, that she wants me to only eat things that she has made, make me incredibly glad to have been born as a man. It's fine, if that's how you feel, I will gladly eat any food!

Trembling with emotion, I try to say, 「Itadakimasu」— Ah, that's right, it was at this moment.

「-?!」

I was assaulted by a headache. It was so terrible and powerful that any words I use to describe it would fall short.

The pain was unprecedented, incomparable, fierce enough to overturn the sky and the ground, but the only things that were overturned were the brown stamina-obento and my body.

The pain should have made me forget everything, including the simple fact that I fell pathetically onto the floor of the classroom.

However, I one thing I can remember clearly is my girlfriend's face as she was clinging onto me, crying and screaming. This is the worst, to make her cry so much – As I regretted this from the bottom of my heart, my consciousness blacked out.

And when I came to, I found myself in this mysterious bathroom. At least according to my memory, that is how these events are linked.

In any case, I must see her right away. I have to tell her, I'm sorry for worrying you, I'm fine, please don't cry anymore.

However, these mysterious circumstances will not let me do so.

If I were simply in a hospital room, I would have just rushed outside. But I have absolutely no idea where this place is. Where do I have to go to meet her? No, to begin with, where on earth am I?

My head is filling up with these questions, and as I come to the conclusion that I should act rather than think –

「No way! You really woke up?!」

The echoing, high-pitched voice of a girl fills the room.

When I turn around, I see a girl with long, ocean-blue hair standing there.

The striking color of her hair draws my attention, but the thing that concerns me more is her appearance. She is wearing a suit of armor and helmet that makes me want to ask, just which RPG is she from?

I want to comment that this is quite a lot of effort to put into a cosplay, but the silver base of the armor has decorations and patterns drawn in blue lines that are the same color as the girl's hair; it has the luster of real metal and she looks as if she is accustomed to wearing it. Each time she takes a step, a heavy sound rings out from the armor.

「Uwah, what should I do... I just tampered with it randomly...」

The female knight has approached to stand right in front of me, mumbling things to herself along the way. Her shining golden eyes are looking directly at me.

「I am Fiora, what is your name? Oh my, there is no way that a Homunculus who has just opened his eyes could answer me –」

「I'm Akabane Zenichi. Hey, could you tell me where on earth this place is?」

– And so I met her. Her full name is Fiora Theo Nanablast.

She was the woman who would later become my wife, but I think there is no need to detail my memories with her here. They are already known to many of Rune's citizens, and official records have already been left at both Rune's royal castle and at the Adventurers' Guild.

What I am recording in this diary are nothing but my own personal memories, my feelings that nobody else needs to know about, including my wife.

This is also an expression of my homesickness for my home country of Japan back on Earth that I can never return to. However, the thing that I regret the most is the beloved girlfriend that I had when I was but a mere student.

It is no great lie to say that I loved her from the bottom of my heart. To the point that I still see her in my dreams occasionally, even now.

Despite it being a simple coincidence, an accident, I am overwhelmed with shame at the fact that I suddenly disappeared from her sight with no warning.

Indeed, the regret that I had when I first opened my eyes in this world, the regret that I had made her cry, even though I have reached this age of over fifty years old, still smolders in the deepest depths of my heart.

That is why I have decided to put it into writing. I know that I can never atone for it, but even so, I hope that another individual from my world who reads this can tell her my feelings.

Tell my feelings to the woman who was my beloved sweetheart. Her name – Kurono Mana.

Chapter 366

「What... is the meaning of this...?」(Kurono)

The astounding contents of Count Redwing's diary are just too much of a shock.

The name of the lover left behind in the very distant homeland of Japan by Count Redwing, the man formerly known as Akabane Zenichi.

Kurono Mana.

Why is the name of my aneki written here? Ah, damn it, I have no idea what's going on –

「Kurono-san, what's the matter?」(Fiona)

Fiona, who is sitting in the seat right next to me, calls out to me and returns my consciousness that is trapped in my spinning thoughts back to reality.

「You are wearing quite the surprised expression.」(Fiona)

「Ah, the contents are a little, no, considerably shocking... To start off with, let's explain things in order.」(Kurono)

That's right, calm down. Let's calm down and get the situation in order.

「This diary contains the events of when the count was in Japan, the same country as me, in his original world.」(Kurono)

I'm sure Fiona has been able to guess at least that much. She gives a nod.

「According to this, it seems that the count lived in the same time period and even in the same town as me. But the most surprising thing is that the count's lover at the time was my aneki.」(Kurono)

「Your onee-san?」(Fiona)

Come to think of it, I wonder how much I've talked to Fiona about my family.

The time I first revealed to her that I came from another world should have been the first time. After that, I occasionally talked about Japan while we were making preparations for battle in Alzas and when we first started living in this

dormitory in Spada.

「Kurono-san, I have heard that you lived with your parents and onee-san, that you were a student and that you were suddenly summoned to this world without warning. But I have not heard many details.」(Fiona)

For now, it's enough that she knows that much.

「The count was summoned to this world on the same day that I was.」
(Kurono)

「If I am not mistaken, he passed away fifty years ago, didn't he? Assuming that this is true, that means that there is a large time lag between him and you, Kurono-san.」(Fiona)

This is the first mystery.

There is no doubt that the count and I, in other words, the high school student Kurono Maou and the university student Akabane Zenichi, both suffered headaches of unknown cause and were summoned to this world.

I had a vague recollection of the date, but this diary clearly says that it was Monday, the 14th of May.

It was indeed right in the middle of the rainy season and it was also raining that day. I remember exchanging awkward greetings with the small Shirasaki-san who was holding an umbrella of an elegant navy-blue color at the pedestrian crossing.

「That day, my mother made a mistake and handed me the obento my aneki made for her boyfriend. At lunch break, I ate Aneki's embarrassing, handmade obento that had a heart drawn on it while my friends made fun of me, and according to this diary, the count ate the obento that was supposed to be for her younger brother – me.」(Kurono)

「I see, so it doesn't seem to be a simple case of misremembering things.」
(Fiona)

The events of that day are accurately linked. If there's any difference, it's that I was attacked by my headache when I visited the literature clubroom after school, while the count experienced his during the lunch break in which he was

supposed to eat his obento – a difference of just a few hours.

「It seems that this world and that world do not share the same flow of time at all.」(Fiona)

If this world and Earth shared the same time axis, Akabane Zenichi should have been summoned to this world just a few hours before me. If that were the case, he wouldn't have reached the social status of count yet. Not even a single year has passed since I came to this world, after all.

「Either a year over there is equivalent to several decades over here, or it's just random.」(Kurono)

「We would need to get more accurate statistics to figure that out. But then, we don't have any clues on any other people from your world.」(Fiona)

We don't know about anyone else from my world other than Count Redwing, who I heard about from Will. If there's anyone else from my world other than me... Damn it, it's sickening to think about, but if there's anyone else, it would be the experimental subjects that that masked group called the『White Sacrament』are still continuing to summon.

But thinking about it, it's doubtful as to whether they were Japanese people living in the twenty-first century like me.

If the people summoned to this world are chosen completely at random, while the young men and women that were the experimental subjects that I saw were Japanese people, I have no way of telling which era they were born in.

No, wait, why were there only Japanese people in the first place?

「Hey, Fiona, black hair and black eyes are well-known characteristics of people from another world, aren't they?」(Kurono)

「Yes, that was the case in the Sinclair Republic. I have not gone as far as to inquire about this in Spada, but it seems that it true here as well.」(Fiona)

If people are summoned truly at random, not only should the time periods differ, but the races of the people should differ as well. No, isn't there a chance that people should be summoned from worlds other than Earth?

I could come up with any number of theories. But the reality is that all the people who have come from a foreign world are Japanese, and among them, two of them were summoned from the same place and same time period. I can't be sure; it might really just be a coincidence, but even so, I can't help but wonder.

「That day, was there something special about the city I was living in?」
(Kurono)

This is the second mystery. Why are there such strict requirements regarding the time and place?

「Had the people of your world observed the interdimensional distance to other worlds to be the shortest at the town that you lived in, Kurono-san?」
(Fiona)

But as Fiona asks this question in return, I quickly reject that theory.

「No, I said this before, but magic didn't exist in the world I lived in. It was never observed or proved that there are other worlds beyond the dimensional wall; other worlds existed only in wild stories.」(Kurono)

That's right, if you apply Earth's common sense, everything about the circumstances I'm in now is completely impossible. Either way, even if there were some specific conditions lining up in that town on that day having a large influence on the other-world-summoning phenomenon, there's no means of proving anything. Even if magic really did exist on Earth and there was some secret organization of mages moving in the shadows, that fact doesn't change.

Anything I can come up with is nothing but a hypothesis.

「Kurono-san, the mechanisms behind how people are summoned from your world are still not clear in the republic or in Spada, so there is no use in thinking about this any further.」(Fiona)

「That's... Well, you might be exactly right.」(Kurono)

There's no way that I can stay unconcerned about this after being thrust into those experiments.

The thing I had been avoiding remembering most of all, my family that I left

behind in my home world, surfaces to my mind against my will.

For Aneki in particular, that means she lost her younger brother and boyfriend on the same day. That sadness – Ah, I can truly understand the feelings that the count put in writing in his diary.

Her face was doll-like and expressionless, but she was always kind. That aneki of mine might be crying now. Thinking about that, I just can't stand it.

「Even though I know I can't do anything about it, I can't help but remember –」(Kurono)

As my feelings of grief and homesickness rise from the depths of my heart and spill out in my words, Fiona stops me.

「Even so, please try not to think about it. Forget about it... Don't hurt yourself.」(Fiona)

Fiona unexpectedly draws close to me. Her nearby golden eyes are looking up at me from near my chest.

I should be completely used to her gloomy gaze, but there is more of a mysterious charm overflowing from it than usual. It's startling. In addition to that, I notice that her soft, white palm has naturally placed itself on the back of my hand that's resting on the table, startling me even more. My heart is racing*.

TLN*: Bit of a play on words here. To “be startled” is “ドキっとする/dokittosuru.” There are two instances of this term in this paragraph. “ドキドキする/dokidoki suru” (2x doki) = have a racing heart

「You are here, together with me, Kurono-san. Is that not enough?」(Fiona)

I thought my heart might stop.

I'm just genuinely happy. Happy at the fact that I've been accepted by someone.

Where I came from, the reason I came here, the principles that made it possible, none of that matters.

The memories we've made since we met on the highway leading to Irz Village, our relationship of trust. Those are undoubtedly the most important things I've

gained since coming to this world.

I know this without needing to be told. I know this, but still – having it said straight to my face is unbelievably embarrassing. I'm so happy that I'm embarrassed. It's a reconfirmation that my feelings have gotten through.

「Yeah, you're right.」(Kurono)

She's right. She's right about everything. Really, everything is just as Fiona says. There's no way I can deny her words.

And thanks to those words, my anxious trembling subsides.

「Then...」(Fiona)

Fiona gazes at me powerfully, as if begging me. I won't let you say what comes next. No, let me be the one to say it here.

「I won't go back.」(Kurono)

She gives a slightly surprised reaction. It's a face that says, 'What are you saying all of a sudden?' No, it's one that says, 'How did you finally realize?' Has Fiona been thinking that I'm really that thick?

I've now become a well-known Rank 5 adventurer, but my origins lie in another world. I'm no longer a resident of that world; I'm an outsider in this one. My very existence is irregular.

I've become so familiar with this world that I even begin to forget that from time to time. From Fiona's point of view, it's something that she would never think about except in times like these.

I think that's why she suddenly felt anxious.

「I won't go back to Japan, I won't ever go back... No, even if there was a way, there's no way I could go back.」(Kurono)

Well, if a way to go back was presented right in front of my eyes, I probably would think hard about it.

Sorry, Aneki. Even so, I have no doubt that I would decide not to go back.

「... Kurono-san.」(Fiona)

「Kuronooo! No, you can't go back! You have to stay here with Lily forever!」

(Lily)

「Oh, Lily... There, there, I'm not going back, so it's okay – Hmm, Lily?」
(Kurono)

Before I know it, I'm comforting Lily by patting her head as she lies on top of my lap, but... I wonder what just happened. Up until now, it was just me and Fiona here.

Lily, just where did you appear from?

「Ah, Kurono, I'm back~」(Lily)

She rolls onto her back like a kitten and smiles as she announces her return.

「Y-yeah, welcome back?」(Kurono)

This somehow doesn't make sense. But Fiona seems even more dissatisfied than I am confused. Of course, her face still has her usual sleepy, poker-face expression, but I don't know how to put it, there's this kind of sullen aura around her.

「Lily-san... Welcome back.」(Fiona)

As Fiona says this, she picks Lily up off my knees. Now she sits Lily on top of her own knees and hugs her from behind.

Hmm, seeing them like this, they really do look like sisters.

「Lily-san, you could have taken more time, much more time with your shopping.」(Fiona)

Fiona begins squishing and playing with Lily's soft, small cheeks.

「No~ Fiona, no!」(Lily)

The child-form Lily struggles, but the witch Fiona has a clever hold on her and won't let her escape.

Come to think of it, I get the feeling that these two have been getting along better since they came back from their training in Avalon. It's very pleasant to see. How beautiful it is to have good friends.

「By the way, Lily, what did you buy?」(Kurono)

Since it seems that Fiona's calmed down for now, I ask Lily this question. For a change of mood.

Rubbing her cheeks that have turned a little red due to the witch's evil influence, Lily gives an enthusiastic response to my question as if she has been waiting for me to ask it.

「A bed!」(Lily)

「... A bed?」(Kurono)

「I see, a bed. That is indeed necessary, isn't it?」(Fiona)

Huh, am I the weird one for questioning the purchase of a bed? That's what the atmosphere seems to indicate. Lily has a self-satisfied look on her face as if waiting for me to praise her, and Fiona's response is as if she totally understands.

No, wait, I won't just go with the flow, I'm absolutely not a man who goes with the flow.

「Why did you buy a bed all of a sudden?」(Kurono)

「Hmm? You know, umm~」(Lily)

This is probably a question that Lily wasn't expecting, judging from the reason that comes out of her mouth after thinking about it.

「I wanted a new bed!」(Lily)

「I see, then I guess it can't be helped!」(Kurono)

Jeez, if it was just that, she could have told me and I would have bought it for her. That's right, I received the fight money from the『Cursed Carnival』and the monetary payment for completing the emergency quest in Iskia, so I'm quite rich at the moment.

If Lily were to selfishly say that she wants something for once, I would definitely want to take the opportunity to give it to her.

「So, what kind of bed did you buy?」(Fiona)

「It's really big!」(Lily)

「Oh, that sounds good. The bed that was originally in the room is quite

small.」(Kurono)

The meager complaint that I am finally able to express. With that bed, which was a little narrow for my body that's larger than most people, I would always worry about whether I might squash Lily if I turned over in my sleep.

「Kurono, look, look! This is the new bed! Yup, here it is!」(Lily)

Lily leaps up from Fiona's lap, clapping her small hands as if unveiling something. Just as I think that she's going to summon the new bed from her light Dimension –

「W-who is this guy?!」(Kurono)

In the next instant, I stand up with so much force that my chair topples over and prepare for a fight.

Because the lounge door has suddenly opened and an enormous man wearing a pitch-black surcoat has rushed inside.

The hard soles of his boots make loud footsteps against the worn-out wooden floor. With each step, a clinking metallic sound comes from inside his black clothes. This figure clad in chainmail and a surcoat reminds me vividly of the Crusaders.

But the thing that draws my attention the most is his face. The smile that I can see beneath the surcoat's hood that's drawn over his head. It's certainly not a smile on a bare face; it's a smile engraved on a steel mask.

His eyes are round dots and his mouth is drawn in a U-shaped curve. It really resembles a smiley face. Of course, I've never laid eyes on such an awkward-looking, fancy item like a smiley face drawn on a steel mask back in Japan.

In the next moment, the strange, smiling-masked man vigorously raises both of his arms that are covered in steel gauntlets.

It doesn't seem like he's armed, but does he intend to fight?! Tch, I don't really know what's going on, but I need to make the first move here.

I'll make you regret attacking the home of the Rank 5 party known as the『Element Masters.』Eat this, Pile B–

「Is this the new bed? It looks quite good.」(Fiona)

「It does, right?! It's super fluffy!」(Lily)

As I raise my fist that's filled with mana and fighting spirit on my own, the high-pitched voices of a Fairy and a witch echo out.

The smiling-masked man waves his arms as if giving signals, and two people enter, carrying a large bed.

Of course, both of them are also wearing black surcoats and steel masks with smiley faces on them. They look completely the same; even their builds are mostly identical. If they were to change places, there would be no way to tell.

But really, who are these guys... I'm the only one asking this question; Fiona is admiring the new bed that's been placed in the lounge whose size is its only redeeming feature, and Lily seems to be in high spirits.

The suspicious trio stand silently in the corner of the room, as if to say that they've done their duty. There's not even the slightest movement from them.

「Hey, Kurono, look! Look at the new bed! Kyah!」(Lily)

Lily bounces up and down on the mattress that seems to possess tremendous softness and elasticity, wanting to hear my thoughts.

I feel sorry for Lily, who is waiting for a favorable response with sparkling eyes, but I'm not currently in a state of mind where I can calmly talk about how soft the bed is.

I'm begging you. I'm begging you, so please tell me just who those three guys are!

「... Kurono-san.」(Fiona)

At this moment Fiona, calls out to me in a casual manner.

Ah, Fiona, you've figured out the questions I want to ask, have you? Thank you. I'm sorry for calling you an airhead up until now. At the right times, Fiona can really read the mood –

「This bed is amazing. This is the famous Water Slime bed, used and loved by nobles and royalty, isn't it?」(Fiona)

Fiona is Fiona after all. Sorry, it's my fault for expecting so much of you.

「By the way, Lily-san, isn't it alright to put those away now? With three of them there, they are taking up a lot of space.」(Fiona)

「Okay~」(Lily)

The existence of the mysterious trio is finally acknowledged at the moment I'm about to fall into despair, as if this timing has been carefully chosen.

Lily and Fiona were ignoring them so magnificently that I was actually wondering whether I was the only one who could see them, but it seems that Lily and Fiona just had no reaction to them because they already knew what these three were.

「Ein, Zwei, Drei, bye-bye!」(Lily)

Lily stands on the bed with one hand on her hip, reciting a mysterious incantation while her other hand gives a wave to accompany her 'bye-bye'.

As if responding to her, the trio clumsily wave their hands that are wrapped in gauntlets in return. Their exaggerated motions are comical at first glance, but they're completely silent.

They're incredibly ominous-looking men, but as a familiar magic circle of light appears over their heads, I begin to understand what's going on.

That's Lily's Dimension. It's not that she's taking something out of it.

Words and actions of farewell. That's right, those three are being 'stored' inside the light.

「That's... an unsummoning spell?」(Kurono)

「Yes, that's right, Kurono-san. Those are the『Living Dead』that Lily-san acquired as a result of her harsh training.」(Fiona)

In other words, they're Servants created through Necromancy.

The reason I'm able to understand this immediately is no doubt because Safiel did the same thing before my very eyes just a little while ago.

That silver Undead knight turned into purple smoke and disappeared when it was unsummoned, but the trio in front of me now are turning into sublime particles of light.

The three large men wearing black equipment leave no trace of themselves behind, as if they never existed in the first place.

But I wish you'd explained that to me first, Fiona.

「Still, it seems that you're controlling living people instead of dead bodies. The characteristic presence that surrounds Undead wasn't there, and more importantly, I could feel life in them.」(Kurono)

「They are specially-made using Homunculi as a base, and it seems that Lily's Necromancy is an original technique that differs from normal.」(Fiona)

Homunculi were briefly explained in the『Dungeon Exploration II』lesson that I once attended. They're artificially-made humanoid life-forms created through ancient magic, and apparently it isn't that unusual to discover them in ruins-type Dungeons.

Most of them are found dead in mummy-like states or turned into Undead monsters, but they can apparently be revived in very rare cases.

I see, special spell formulas were used with special corpses to create those three. It sounds questionable, but considering that it's Lily, I can believe her without a problem.

Now then, this is where I want to hear a detailed explanation of Lily's amazing Necromancy, but...

「Mufufu~ I'm going to roll around with Kurono!」(Lily)

「Since the bed is so large, I can sleep in it as well, can't I?」(Fiona)

「No, Fiona, you can't!」(Lily)

「Isn't it fine, isn't it fine?」(Fiona)

「Kyaah!」(Lily)

Before I know it, Fiona has dived onto the bed to roll around on it with Lily. Damn it, I want to roll around with them as well...

For now, let's enjoy the comfort of this new bed. Yes, let's do that.

Chapter 368

As I hear the bell that signals the end of lunchtime, I walk forward with my back to the main school buildings. My footsteps are heavy.

「... The Alzas Fort, huh.」(Kurono)

It's the place we once desperately defended, and now it's become an important location for the Crusaders that allows them to extend the reach of their next invasion. This fact alone causes emotions of defeat, a mixture of anger, fear and regret, to swirl around in the bottom of my heart.

Advancing fortifications, marching soldiers. Spada's increased vigilance in response. Signs of rebellion in Daidalos.

I'm glad that the thing I was most worried about, Spada letting their guard down, isn't happening. But there's no doubting that an air of tension is rising, to the point that one can say it's the eve of war.

That much is clear from the fact that Spada's messengers haven't returned and the Crusaders haven't given any form of reply.

「How much time is left before they come attacking...」(Kurono)

Even as I whisper this question, there's no way I can know the answer. There are limits to Spada's ability to gather intelligence. And there's no way that the Crusaders will suggest a fair battle like the Dragon King Garvinal. They can appear at any time, with no warning.

「I have to hurry.」(Kurono)

According to Will, if there's not an invasion within the month, it will be peaceful until next year's spring. The reason is simple – There's going to be snow.

The passing of seasons of Pandora's middle-eastern regions is similar to Japan; snow could fall as early as November, or by mid-December at the latest. Incidentally, the equivalent to November is the Month of Frozen Earth (Toudo) and December is the Month of Gloom (Meian).

Anyway, in those months, the Galahad Mountain Range that's the only invasion route from Daidalos will be blocked off by blizzards. Spada will be attacked by a cold wave fit to be called the coming of a hard winter.

Well, I haven't experienced winter in Daidalos or Spada yet, so I don't know how it's really going to be, but Will had gone into serious-mode during his explanation so I have no doubt in his words. In fact, it's said that even Garvinal would never attack during winter.

Now that I think about it, Fiona said that the Sinclair Republic has faced many harsh battles during the winter. War during winter is difficult, no matter which country it's in.

「Still, I can't stay so carefree.」(Kurono)

The fact that the enemy is approaching from across those mountains doesn't change.

I have four trials remaining. Lust, Gluttony, Pride and Envy. I don't know which elements will correspond to which sins, but the remaining elements should be ice, wind, water and light. The darkness element falls under black magic, so it can be excluded.

Drive that enhances my physical strength, Gear that enhances my defense and Accel that enhances my concentration. Considering that they're all effects that enhance my abilities, I should at least be able to gain a speed enhancement from one of them.

In the Boost system of modern magic, there is something called『Element Boost』, but, hmm, it's difficult to judge whether I'd be able to gain that effect.

Either way, if I'm going to fight not only the Crusaders but the Apostles as well, I want to finish all of the trials and gain the Demon King's true divine protection.

At first, I thought the divine protections were a little dull since it just let me change the element of my mana, but now that I've learned of their true power, I understand how incredible they are. With seven such transcendental enhancing effects, I'm sure I'll be able to hold my own in a head-on fight with an Apostle.

The fact that this hope exists is making me even more impatient.

「Where are the monsters for the trials... No, I suppose I have no choice but to just search for them.」(Kurono)

Well, I should go to the Adventurers' Guild to gather information while I'm out shopping.

Now that I've reached the highest Rank, Rank 5, I can freely visit the upper district contained within Spada's inner walls, the celeb-zone inhabited by the nobles. And I can use the main headquarters of Spada's Adventurers' Guild as well.

At the main branch of the Adventurers' Guild that only high-Rank adventurers can use, I'll be able to get more complete information on monsters than at the academy district branch that I'm very well-accustomed to. It's possible that there are extermination quests for Rank 5 monsters that aren't posted in the other branches, and some of them might be the monsters I'm aiming for.

I have a feeling that my day's plans are getting busier and busier, but I suppose it's fine. With my current mental state, I'd feel more restless if I was taking it easy.

As I finish gathering my thoughts, I arrive back at the dormitory. The same worn-out, wooden front door greets me.

I could have gone straight into town, but I thought I should say something to Lily and Fiona first. Well, I'm not certain that the two of them are in the dormitory; there's a high chance that Lily is attending a Necromancy lesson and Fiona is in the great library. This is just in case.

「I'm home~」(Kurono)

My voice echoes as I announce my return and open the rickety door.

There's no response, so it seems that the two of them aren't home after all.

「... Ah... Onii-sa... Gah...」

But I can hear a muffled voice coming from the lounge that's right down the corridor past the entrance.

「Huh, has Simon come back already?」(Kurono)

My ears can make out a small voice through the door. I recognize Simon's lovely voice.

He returned faster than expected. Well, he's back, so whatever!

Coming to this positive conclusion, I open the door and speak out.

「Yo, Simon, welcome back!」(Kurono)

I see the face of a beautiful Elf girl, no, a handsome Elf boy, which I have not seen since I rescued him at Iskia Fortress.

「Ah... Onii-san... Th-this is...」(Simon)

Simon is indeed here. However, this is not an emotional reunion between close friends.

「Hey, you must be the rumored Nightmare Berserker. Excuse me for being in your home.」

Because there is an unfamiliar third party present.

She's a beautiful woman in the prime of her youth. She has brown skin that overflows with exotic charm and silver hair that looks as if it's made of pure Mythril. And considering she has the same long, pointed ears as Simon, she's undoubtedly of the Dark Elf race.

Hmm, I definitely don't know her. I don't have a single Dark Elf acquaintance.

「Come to think of it, I've heard lots of stories about you, but this is the first time we've met, isn't it –」(Dark Elf)

See, it really is our first time meeting. Now I'm certain of that, but honestly, I don't really care about that right now. The problem is, there is something I am far more concerned about than trying to figure out who she is.

This onee-san's appearance is really erotic.

「– Nice to meet you. Call me Sofie.」(Sofie)

She's wearing clothes like a dancer from Arabian Nights. The design of these clothes, their shape and the way they expose her body, are perfect. They match her tall stature and her ridiculously glamorous figure that looks like an embodiment of a man's fantasies as if they were order-made. That makes this

even more troubling.

Her voluptuous flesh that is clearly visible through a see-through veil is beyond captivating.

A white top that looks as if it will burst trying to contain her large chest and a thong with a dangerously small surface area are the only substantial things covering her bare body. The fact that I can catch glimpses of what is essentially her underwear beneath the decorative pieces of cloth fluttering near her chest and waist is incredibly bad for my heart, in a psychological way.

「Nice to meet you, I'm Kurono.」(Kurono)

But still, I somehow, just barely, manage to give a calm response.

Thanks, Mom, I managed to avoid being mesmerized by the Dark Erofu* Sofie-san because I've grown tired of seeing your huge breasts.

TLN*: This is a joke where the author has replaced エルフ/erufu meaning "Elf" with エロフ/erofu, a combination of Elf and エロ/ero which means "Erotic"

「By the way, Sofie-san, what business has brought you here?」(Kurono)

「I've come to see Simon. Ah, Lily can vouch for my background, so you don't have to worry. I'm not a suspicious person.」(Sofie)

「Yes, well... It's true that Lily-san introduced us, but...」(Simon)

Judging from Simon's incredibly awkward testimony, I guess Sofie-san is speaking the truth.

The thing is, her face below her clear-blue eyes is covered by a veil, masking her expression. The veil is transparent, so I can see her nose, mouth and the contours of her face, but for some reason, they won't stay in my mind at all.

This strange sensation is an unmistakable sign that her face veil is a Magic Item with an effect that prevents her from being recognized.

Considering that she's covering her bare face with something like that, she's more suspicious than a man wearing a ski mask, but I suppose it's fine to trust her if Lily has vouched for her background. At the very least, there's little chance that she's a robber who uses her erotic appearance to have her target let their guard down.

Now that I know this much, I suppose it's about time.

「I see, well then, please make yourself at home.」(Kurono)

I, the hindrance, should leave.

「Yes, thank you for being so considerate.」(Sofie)

「Eh, no way, wait, Onii-san!」(Simon)

Pretending not to hear Simon's voice as he clearly tries to stop me from leaving, I hurriedly leave the lounge behind me.

「Come back, Onii-saaan!」(Simon)

As I hear Simon's heartbroken scream, I reach behind me to close the door in order to make absolutely sure that I won't turn around.

「Sorry, Simon. I can't stay there and pretend not to read the mood...」
(Kurono)

I read the mood with everything I had. With desperate feelings in my mind, I left Simon and Sofie-san alone out of consideration.

Why is that? It's simple; I could tell with a single glance. From the moment I foolishly opened the door and said, 「Simon, welcome back!」

Indeed, Sofie-san was firmly holding onto Simon. A passionate embrace, as if they had fallen in love.

My romantic experience is nonexistent, but if presented with such a sight, even I can sense the atmosphere that indicates the relationship between the two is one between a man and a woman. I can sense it more than I'd like. To the point that it's extremely awkward for the third party, me, to witness.

In other words, the conclusion my intuition comes to is that it's a problem to be solved between the people involved. Therefore, I'm just a hindrance. I would only be a hindrance if I stayed, and so would Lily who introduced Sofie-san to Simon. It's only natural for us to not be there anymore. Now we just have to leave the rest up to the young couple.

「... Haah, I suppose we'll have to cancel tonight's drinking plans.」(Kurono)

As the image of Simon's red face buried in Sofie-san's cleavage due to the

difference in their heights resurfaces in my mind, I begin walking.

I look up to see that a few wispy clouds have appeared in the previously clear sky during the short time I was in the dormitory. As I look further, I see a gray sea of clouds closing in on Spada from the Galahad Mountain Range.

「Looks like it's going to be stormy tonight.」(Kurono)

Whispering this cool-sounding monologue line, I head towards Spada's town to go shopping, trying to forget about everything.

Chapter 367

The next day. Lunchtime on the 8th of the Month of Blue Moon (Sougetsu). I have come to the dining room in the academy's main building that is currently crowded with starving students. I haven't come here to fulfil the hope of having a wild feast that I abandoned yesterday, but to meet someone.

The『Seven Goddesses of War』, an impressive painting depicting Mia-chan's seven wives, is in the background. I see that the person I'm meeting has arrived here before me and taken a seat.

「Fuh, you have come... I am aware that we are unable to avoid the intersection of our fates, but I have grown tired of waiting for our reunion.」
(Will)

「Yo, Will.」(Kurono)

Sitting there with arms and legs crossed, leaning slightly forward, is Will, whose face I last saw at the victory party the day before yesterday.

Next to him is the maid Seria, who is standing there quietly with her presence erased as usual. With her usual composed expression, she gives a slight bow towards me and then quickly begins preparing a cup of tea.

By the time I take my seat and we begin the first topic of our conversation, there is a cup of amber-colored tea before my eyes that emits steam with a sweet-smelling aroma. Her work is incredibly fast. This person is a professional maid after all.

「Haah, I've reached a troublesome social status where I can't even have a quiet lunch if I'm not sneaky about it.」(Kurono)

「Hahaha, such is the fate of a hero! When Nero reached Rank 5, he wore an apprentice's robe, just as you are doing.」(Will)

Though it's tedious, I'm unable to remove the hood of the apprentice mage robe that I'm wearing for the first time in a while.

After reflecting on the skirmish with the guards yesterday, I've decided to

adopt an inconspicuous appearance for a while as I go about my academy life.

Still, I'd never expected that I'd be wearing this thing that Fiona gave me for experimental purposes again. It's not something I'm particularly emotionally attached to, but –

「I have made some alterations, so I want you to test how comfortable it is to wear. Here, please wear this for a while, at least for three days.」(Fiona)

Since Fiona presented it to me with those words, I couldn't help but to wear it.

Fiona's scent faintly lingers on it, so it's actually a little embarrassing. Well, I'm sure it'll disappear if I wear it for the whole day today.

Either way, it looks like I'll be borrowing this thing for a while. I'll make sure to wash it properly before returning it to Fiona.

「If it were just girls squealing at me like they do for Prince Nero, I wouldn't have to be wearing this, though.」(Kurono)

The problem is that the screams directed towards me are not high-pitched squeals, but genuine screams of fear. I'm finding it quite difficult to get Helen's expression of pure fear out of my mind.

I've killed numerous people up to this point, but I've never made a girl cry. It's actually quite a shock to me.

「The title of Rank five is special, causing those who bear it to gain the attention of not only masses of women, but also of the nation and Adventurers' Guild – though it seems that there are some interesting rumors regarding you that are spreading quickly, Kurono.」(Will)

As Will smiles with a slightly unpleasant expression, I have a bad feeling about what's coming next.

「Are they rumors that I attacked a noble girl from Avalon in the arena yesterday... or something like that?」(Kurono)

「A lunchtime nightmare, a maddened sexual assault in the arena – the Nightmare Berserker rapes a female exchange student from Avalon.」(Will)

Will spreads out a single article on the table. The inciting words that he has

just spoken are written in large letters across the top, and there's even an illustration of a large, red-eyed, black man tearing the clothes of a lovely girl into shreds.

「W-what the hell is this...」(Kurono)

「Calm yourself; this is not Spada's newspaper. This is the magazine published by the information committee in this academy, well-known for its false, gossip-filled material and exaggerated articles.」(Will)

Now that I look at it, the date of publication is today. Considering they're only students, they've already made a report of yesterday's events and spread the news around... What a fearsome bunch.

「Don't you feel the need to ask me what really happened?」(Kurono)

「The name of the girl who was attacked was written in the article; she is Helen, eldest daughter of the Azrael house, which is one of the Twelve Noble Houses of Avalon. The fact that she is the captain of Princess Nell's guards is well-known. Considering the rumored relationship between you and Princess Nell after the events at Iskia, it is not difficult for me to imagine that she selected you as a target to be purged. My word, what a disaster to befall you right after your return.」(Will)

「Thanks, Will.」(Kurono)

The only words that come out of my mouth are those of gratitude. Ah, what a wonderful thing it is to be trusted.

「But won't I really be treated as a criminal at this rate?」(Kurono)

Will believes me, but that doesn't mean that the world will.

I'd thought that things would be fine considering how things ended yesterday, but with something like this before my eyes, I'm starting to feel anxious, even if it is a gossip article.

「I suppose there will be rumors. However... Fuh, the people of Spada have no ears to listen to the excuses of those defeated in a battle they started themselves.」(Will)

The fact that Helen and the guards picked a fight with me seems to be known.

Well, she did do it brazenly in broad daylight. There's no way there wouldn't be eyewitnesses. Judging from Safiel's words, I can imagine that the curious onlookers who gathered around the arena were aware of that.

Also, she started the fight herself with large numbers on her side, a situation that was clearly not something that could be called fair. If you're defeated in such a situation, don't complain if you're killed or raped – or so the people of Spada would apparently say.

Rather than being savages, their culture just regards duels as sacred events. The victorious are absolute. It is only natural that they can kill or spare the defeated as they please and take their belongings. Even if it is a mock battle between students, as long as it is called a duel, that is how things go.

There's no doubt that Helen, a person from Avalon, wasn't aware of this.

「And it is common for ill rumors to spread about those who have newly become Rank 5. This incident will join all the other baseless rumors and be forgotten sooner or later.」(Will)

「I see, that's a bit of a relief.」(Kurono)

Honestly speaking, I'm rather relieved. I quite seriously thought that that I might... be locked up on false charges. I'm really glad that it's turned out to be a needless worry.

「By the way... Is it true that you defeated the genius swordsman, Kai?」(Will)

Will asks me this question with sparkling eyes. Hmph, so be it, I'll give you the answer you want to hear!

「Yeah, I defeated him with one hit.」(Kurono)

「OH! SO IT WAS TRUE!」(Will)

I was expecting an excited reaction, but Will gives an even more intense reaction than I expected. I'm suddenly embarrassed by the fact that I boasted and said that I did it in one hit.

「W-well, I did defeat him in one hit, but I kind of only barely managed –」(Kurono)

「No, you do not need to speak any further! I understand, I understand very

well. A duel between powerful individuals designated as Rank 5 in which the two exchange a single, honed attack, deciding the victor in an instant... I am sure that was how it went.」(Will)

「Yeah, well, I suppose it was pretty much something like that.」(Kurono)

The only response I'm able to give is a vague one like one of Fiona's. I know that I defeated Kai with my divine protections and strength, but I can't shake off the feeling that the way I beat him was kind of like foul play. Though with that said, I'd definitely turn down a fair-and-square rematch involving only swordsmanship and martial skills.

「Still, if I had not seen you defeat the Greed-Gore with my own eyes, the fact that you defeated Kai in a single blow would be difficult to believe even for me.」(Will)

「He did have amazing power and speed. On top of that, his perception was good as well.」(Kurono)

「And above all, that man is tough. Nero was completely exhausted after defeating Kai in a duel last year. He made many complaints, such as Kai would not fall no matter how many times he was struck, that he would stand up over and over, that there was no end to the battle, that it was troublesome. And he said he would never do it again.」(Will)

Yeah, I definitely don't want a rematch.

There's no doubt that if I hadn't landed a clean straight punch strengthened with『Overdrive』, it would have turned into a slugfest.

It's true that we couldn't use attacks that would kill or maim each other as it was a mock battle, but even so, I could still feel how tough Kai was. It was pretty scary when he was charging straight through my Gatling Burst.

「Come to think of it, what happened to Safiel?」(Kurono)

「Hmm? Was she not just observing your duel with Kai?」(Will)

I see, the fact that she made an attempt to murder me hasn't spread at all. I was expecting this, but the way it's been swept under the rug makes me a little angry.

I have absolutely no reason to keep the fact that she was aiming to take my life a secret, though. To my friend who believes in my words, I can tell him everything and have him share my anger.

「No, that woman really turned out to be something else –」(Kurono)

And so, with the hint of a grudge in my voice, I explain what happened.

「Hmm, the Undead knight in full Mythrill armor is her most powerful servant. Her intent to murder you was genuine.」(Will)

「I really thought that surprise attack was going to kill me.」(Kurono)

「Indeed, as to be expected from Taa-chan, the ultimate Undead created by the prodigy of the Hydra house. The fact that Safiel made the Nightmare Berserker truly fear for his life shows that her Rank 5 status is not merely for show.」(Will)

As frustrating as it is, I can't help but to acknowledge her ability now that I've crossed swords with her. But there's one word that Will said that bothers me more than anything else.

「What is Taa-chan?」(Kurono)

「The name of that Undead knight. Its official name is Takion, but Safiel refers to it as Taa-chan. It is likely that its official name is remembered by... none other than me. She is rather careless about how she names things, you see.」(Will)

I would normally wonder if it's alright to give it such a random name, but, well, I got a glimpse into the broken state of her mind. That might just be how things often turn out for geniuses.

「Either way, there is no doubt that Safiel is the most cunning individual in Wing Road, no, in the entire Spada Royal Academy. Surely she will not make any assassination attempts during peaceful times, but... there is no telling what she may attempt to do in places such as Dungeons. It would be wise to ensure that you do not ever lower your guard.」

「Yeah, you're absolutely right.」(Kurono)

For now, I think I should take care when I'm doing quests. If I die in a Dungeon, it will look like the work of monsters, after all. If there ever is a next

time, I have to make sure to strike back with the intent to kill.

Well, I'll be praying that even Safiel won't be free enough to be looking for opportunities to kill me around the clock.

「By the way, Kurono, there is a question that I truly wish to ask. Would you permit me to do so?」(Will)

「W-what is it?」(Kurono)

This is the only response I'm able to give as Will suddenly says this with a meek look on his face. I'm not guilty of anything, but now that I'm being questioned again, I feel a little anxious.

「... What happened between you and Princess Nell?」(Will)

Ah, that. I see, that's certainly something he would be curious about.

Rather than getting the feeling that I'm being doubted in a strange way, I actually feel more at ease because of the scary emergency Element Masters meeting with Fiona and Lily that I experienced.

Other than the mistake I made of being too careless around a member of a royal family, I should have no reason to hesitate about telling him of my relationship with her.

「Ah, let's see, Nell is –」(Kurono)

And so I explain everything in order, starting with the day we first met, the 3rd of the Month of Red Flame (Kouen), when Merry stopped in her tracks and Nell saved me, and finishing with the battle at Iskia.

During my explanation, Saria is kind enough to take care of me and Will and bring us lunch.

Both of us are eating the same Dortoth hamburger set meal. Will chews the Dortoth meat with a complicated expression on his face; perhaps he's made some kind of connection between my words and the events in the battle at Iskia.

As we are almost finished eating, I reach the end of my recount of my memories with Nell.

「Is that so... I see. I now have a good understanding of the reason why Princess Nell is fixated on you.」(Will)

「Yeah, because she's an important friend.」(Kurono)

「Hmm?」(Will)

「Eh?」(Kurono)

「Ah, no, you are right, she is a friend. It has not been long since you met, but you consider each other to be important friends. That is your perception of it, isn't it, Kurono?」(Will)

「Of course. There were some times where I almost mistakenly thought that she was interested in me, but she's clearly declared that I'm a friend, and Nell is a kind person so she's like that to everyone, right?」(Kurono)

「Y-yes.」(Will)

Will gives an affirmative response, but for some reason, his gaze has been averted. He is looking into Seria's cool-blue eyes. What kind of eye contact is this?

「By the way, Will, is Nell not getting any better? I heard that she collapsed in Iskia and she's still bedridden.」(Kurono)

It doesn't seem that she's been hospitalized, but I've heard that she's continuing to rest in the women's dormitory while taking no visitors. Nell's condition has become a rumor spreading through the academy so I hear about these things even without really trying to.

「Hmm, so you are worried about her after all.」(Will)

「Of course. It was Nell's will to go to Iskia, but it's still a fact that I bear some responsibility.」(Kurono)

「That is why Nero struck you once as well.」(Will)

I do think that was just an act of self-satisfaction, though. Perhaps understanding that as well, Will does not deny my words.

「In any case, Princess Nell apparently has no problems with her physical body; she is completely healthy. In other words, she is suffering from emotional

problems.」(Will)

「... The battle of Iskia ended in a great victory for us, so what could have been such a shock for her?」(Kurono)

Indeed, everyone recognized it as such a great victory that decorations were awarded and a victory party was held.

But the reality is that Nell is still lying in her bed. She is in such a serious condition that her older brother punched me and I was almost lynched by her guards.

「Hmm, that is... No, you are right, Princess Nell is kinder than anyone, but as a result, her heart is delicate. It is possible that she is grieving over those we could not avoid losing, or perhaps she is suffering because of something that we cannot even imagine.」(Will)

「That's certainly possible, but... what are we supposed to do, then?」(Kurono)

「Wait for time to resolve the problem – or so I thought, but now that I have heard of the beginning of romance between you and Princess Nell, there is something I am certain of.」(Will)

Oi, Will, did you just casually say, 'beginning of romance'? A beginning of a romance is the first meeting between a man and woman who become lovers, isn't it?

「You should go and visit her, Kurono.」(Will)

Will suggests this to me full of confidence, as if this is a secret plan that will turn everything around. The monocle over his right eye shines as if it has perfectly picked this moment to do so.

「I mean, I really want to visit her, but she's not taking visitors, right? And since she's in the women's dormitory, I can't go near.」(Kurono)

「No need to worry about such things. I have already taken measures, knowing that this might happen.」(Will)

It seems that this was a thoroughly prepared trick rather than a secret plan to turn things around.

As Will raises a hand, Seria quickly produces a single envelope. An impressive,

incredibly quick response. And then this plain white envelope with a wax seal bearing the crest of Spada's royal family is offered to me.

Now then, I wonder what on earth this is.

「Oh, do not open this here. After you leave this place, read it somewhere you are sure that nobody will see you.」(Will)

「Y-yeah, alright.」(Kurono)

I have no choice but to comply with Will's words as he emphasizes this point. I'll obediently put it away in my Shadow Gate for now.

Maybe this is some kind of letter of introduction from the Spadan royal family. Maybe if I present this, I'll be allowed to visit the resting princess.

Considering that, it's an important document that contains the handwriting of a royal family member. Alright, I'll be careful with it.

「Thanks, Will, you're being really helpful.」(Kurono)

「It is but a trivial matter. With my gray brains, this level of –」(Will)

He continues his inciting words and finishes it off with a loud laugh. I don't know if he's supposed to be humble or boastful, but my feelings of gratitude won't change either way.

If I can meet Nell directly, I can at least stop being worried for her without knowing what's going on.

I've also been thinking of asking Nell for a favor. I can't ask this of Lily or Fiona; it has to be Nell. Just this one thing, no matter what...

Well, it's something that can wait, so I'll ask her when she gets better.

「Incidentally, Kurono, today is the day that Simon finally makes his return to the dormitory.」(Will)

I'm sure Will is trying to keep a cool tone, but he is clearly unable to hide his delight. He seems kind of restless. He's like a guy in middle school talking about the girl he likes.

Similarly, my heart is also throbbing at the prospect of seeing Simon again for the first time in a while. No, I'm certainly not worried about the fact that I fed

him antidote potion mouth-to-mouth. Absolutely not.

Actually, let's shut that incident away at the very bottom of my mind. I'm sure even Simon doesn't remember it since his consciousness was hazy at the time.

「Won't it be around evening when he returns?」(Kurono)

Will and I were thinking of paying a visit to the Bardiel residence, where Simon is resting, but we received a letter saying that he'll return in eight days right before we did, so we decided to just wait patiently for him to come back. The letter did say,「Thanks for your concern, but you don't have to visit.」

「Then let us drink the night away to celebrate his return!」(Will)

「Yeah, Simon didn't get to attend the victory party, after all.」(Kurono)

Well then, I'll have to go shopping and make preparations. I was planning to go shopping in the afternoon anyway, so I'll take the opportunity to buy the necessary things then. Come to think of it, I should look for something to give to Nell when I visit her as well. I'm sure there's not going to be any canned peaches, so I'll have to think of something else...

「Muh, we are behind schedule; shall we proceed to the main topic of discussion?」(Will)

All kinds of conversation topics have come up, so we've taken quite the detour. But I certainly haven't come here to have an enjoyable chat with Will.

I'm more or less prepared to hear this information, information that I need to know no matter what. The information more precious than any reward that the king of an entire nation could have given me.

「Yeah, I'm counting on you, Will. What's going on with the Crusaders right now –」(Kurono)

Chapter 369

I awaken to the sound of raindrops striking violently against the window. I open my eyes with an empty mind to see that it is pitch-black, and the only sound to be heard in the room is that of the window rattling in the wind and rain.

Heavy rain in the middle of the night.

It is almost a reflection of my heart; it is possible that I am still dreaming.

The deep darkness of hopelessness. The torrential rain of Iskia continues to pour down within me, never ceasing.

It was supposed to be clear. The rain was supposed to stop and I should have been blessed with a sparkling, seven-colored rainbow.

「... Kurono-kun.」(Nell)

Our time together ended. No, in truth, it had never even begun.

Because Kurono-kun had a partner from the very beginning. There was a woman that he loved much more than me.

But that woman was a demon-like child –

「Kuh! Nnh, uu...」(Nell)

I feel nauseous from just remembering it. The wicked smile of the Fairy who is innocent and beautiful only in appearance.

I understand, I truly understand. That girl wants everything of Kurono-kun's. She will own his body, conquer his heart and monopolize his very existence. She will not allow anyone to touch him or even lay a single finger on him. Do not approach him, do not talk to him, do not look at him – he is mine.

The reason I instantly understood her twisted intentions even without telepathy was undoubtedly because I, too, had the same –

「N-no! I am different, I am not like that, I am always thinking of K-Kurono-kun above all else. That's why, that's why...」(Nell)

That's why I was supposed to become Kurono-kun's number one. I had to.

But reality was different; Kurono-kun embraced that child and the witch... without even glancing in my direction...

「Lies, lies, everything is a lie... It's wrong, it's wrong, this is wrong, no, I definitely do not want to accept this!」(Nell)

That's right, Kurono-kun needs me. He needs me more than anyone else; I must be the closest person to his side.

「He is being deceived, he is being deceived, Kurono-kun is being deceived by that wicked child...」(Nell)

That's right, that's right, Kurono-kun is simply being deceived; he is not to blame for anything. I know that Kurono-kun is very honest and very kind.

The image that surfaces in my mind is that of Kurono-kun who is always doing his best. I remember the emotions of grief he felt at the death of his companions that I saw in the fragments of his memories.

That's right, he is a person who pushes through with his own strength, never blames others and shoulders his own responsibilities.

That is why he is taken advantage of. Without even noticing that he is in the trap of a cunning demon.

「I-I have to... save Kurono-kun...」(Nell)

Only I can save him. I must do it, I must prove that that girl is a demon. Quickly, right now, I must go to where Kurono-kun is –

「U... wah...」(Nell)

But my mind and body are frozen. They will not move, they cannot move. Raising the upper half of my body is my limit. I cannot even get out of my bed.

I will go to meet Kurono-kun. The moment I think this, it surfaces in my mind again.

「Ah, you two are really the number one for me.」(Kurono)

The image of him embracing the two of them and whispering gently to them.

「Ah, uu... Uuuu...」(Nell)

No, no! I don't want to see, I don't want to see that anymore. I can't bear to see it. If I witness Kurono-kun being kind to other girls in front of me again –

「No, no, no, no, no, no no no no no, no, stop it, don't make me see that!」
(Nell)

I will go crazy. My mind will go crazy and my heart will break.

But the thing I am truly scared of is...

「... Don't... come to love... that girl.」(Nell)

I'm scared to say it to Kurono-kun face-to-face.

「The one I love is...」(Kurono)

If he makes a clear declaration, it is finished. I am certain that it will be the end of me.

「Ah, aah... No... Kurono-kun, don't throw me away, please don't throw me away, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry –」(Nell)

I can't meet Kurono-kun because I am scared of being rejected. I cannot muster the courage to go and meet him. I have no confidence that he will accept me.

That is why I cannot move. No matter how much time passes, I cannot leave this soft bed.

「I'm sorry... But I want to see you, Kurono-kun...」(Nell)

I want to see him. I want to see him right now. I want to see his face, I want to hear his voice. I want to hold his hand, smile softly and have meaningless conversations. I want him to be by my side.

My feelings grow stronger. No, my『feelings』are not such light things. This is definitely, yes, it is – a desire.

「I want to see you... I want to see you, Kurono-Kun...」(Nell)

Loud thunder echoes, drowning out the words of desire spilling out of my mouth.

The flash of lightning preceding it illuminates the room for just an instant. In that moment, I see my own reflection in the window that doesn't have its

curtains drawn, and I shudder.

A second flash of lightning. I see the face of a ghost in front of me once more.

The gloomy, cloudy, blue irises of bloodshot eyes. Thick shadows beneath them that appear to have been hastily drawn on with ink. The terrible appearance of my eyes is more than enough to indicate that both my body and heart are suffering from the burdens of despair, fatigue, lack of sleep and frustration.

The beautiful black color of my hair that I had always been secretly proud of has completely faded away; my hair has become unkempt and is protruding in numerous directions from my head. My skin that was white to begin with has become even more pale; it is now the ominous color that one would expect to see in the skin of a seriously ill person.

Despite that, I am gasping as I voice my desire to meet Kurono-kun.

「... I feel sick.」(Nell)

I feel sick, I feel uneasy. What an unsightly woman I am.

「Fu, ufufu... There is no way I can meet you, is there...」(Nell)

I have merely arrived at such an obvious conclusion, but for some reason, my tears will not stop.

As I feel large tear droplets spilling forth from my filthy eyes, my eardrums shake with the second roar of thunder.

Its rumbling sound, which I can feel vibrating in the pit of my stomach, is violent enough to make someone fear for their life. But the inside of my head is completely white; that sound is not enough to shake my emotions even a little.

Even so, as a third flash of lightning comes, I instinctively avert my gaze. I don't want to see my pathetic self. I don't want to realize how unfit I am as a woman for Kurono-kun.

And then in the direction that I desperately turn my gaze to, I see it.

The shadow from the window, cast on the floor. The shadow of a person.

「Who is it?!」(Nell)

Feelings of fear and anxiety rise within me in an instant as I turn towards the window. Someone is clinging to that window.

「Ah... Umm, good evening, Nell?」(Kurono)

「Eh... Kurono... kun?」(Nell)

Ah, I'm sure I am having a dream, seeing a hallucination.

The only thing I can see is the man who has continued to be on my mind for a long, long, long time. He is currently somehow standing on a window ledge on the third floor of the women's dormitory while being struck by the heavy rain.

Kurono-kun has come to see me. There is no way that such a convenient event could be reality –

「... This is Kurono. I'm commencing infiltration into the management cadet women's dormitory.」(Kurono)

I whisper these words unconsciously as I see the large, three-story building towering over me in the darkness of the night. I feel like I'm either a secret agent who has been entrusted with a special mission, or a panty thief with hidden sexual perversions.

A feeling of unpleasant nervousness wraps itself around my entire body. I don't know whether it's cold sweat or greasy sweat, but I feel some moisture on my body. There's no doubt it's because I've been caught by the heavy rain that started pouring down in the evening. Let's blame it on that.

「I wonder if this is really alright... Will.」(Kurono)

I feel more than a little unease, but even so, this is not only the sole viable way of visiting Nell, but also the plan to revive her that Will has come up with with absolute confidence in himself.

In the afternoon, after finishing the shopping that I had done for certain reasons and some rather unsuccessful information-gathering at the headquarters of the Adventurers' Guild in Spada, I sat alone on a bench in the academy and discreetly opened the envelope that Will had given me.

This is the basic summary of what was written on the paper inside:

「If you visit Nell, she will definitely become healthy again, so you should

sneak into the women's dormitory, Kurono! Check the other side for detailed instructions on getting inside!」

So that's how it is. On the other side of the paper, there really were detailed instructions on how to get inside as well as a lot of other information such as the areas of surveillance and patrol routes on top of the times and frequency of female students entering and leaving. Will, how on earth did you find all of this out... No, I shouldn't think too much about that right now.

「Alright, there's no sign of any people. If I'm going, now's the time, I suppose」(Kurono)

The steel fence stretching around the building in front of me is about three meters in height, I guess. This is the fence that encloses the women's dormitory, and the place I'm at is a little towards the back of the building. If I climb over this and run across the back yard that's been turned into something of a garden, I'll reach the women's dormitory made of beautiful, white-painted Spadan architecture.

The first barrier, the fence, is of a height I can get over with a vertical jump, but my jump and landing will make a loud noise. This naturally limits my available options to just one.

「Anchor Hands.」(Kurono)

Come to think of it, it's been a while since I used these without Hitsugi. As this thought runs through my mind, I climb up the tentacle that I've extended to the top of the fence and make a successful, silent landing on the other side.

With just a brief glance left and right, I start crossing the garden quickly. I pass between the neatly pruned shrubs and jump over the flower bed, making sure not to trample the flowers that are receiving the sky's watery blessing.

I safely reach the dormitory's white wall. According to the rough sketch of the women's dormitory that was included in the envelope, this spot should be right below Nell's room.

A considerable amount of time has passed since the sun set; people have likely finished eating their dinner. Nell's curtains have remained open, despite all the others having been drawn. Not only are the curtains open, but the

window is unlocked as well.

This trick is truly simple. Nell's last visitor today was Will, so he apparently set things up this way.

Or rather, Seria had visited Nell, bearing gifts from Will.

It seems that it's not easy for even the Second Prince of Spada to set foot in the women's dormitory where the presence of men is forbidden. However, it is also true that Will is Nell's childhood friend. Sending her get-well gifts is only natural.

Well, nobody would suspect that it was a trick to let a man get inside, but... No, really, if I get found out, I'll probably actually be put on Avalon's wanted list.

「I've come this far, I can't turn back now... Sorry, Lily, Fiona.」(Kurono)

I feel bad for those two since they were worried about the risks of getting to close to members of a royal family, but as a friend, I can't leave Nell like this. If someone tells me that she'll feel better if I visit her, a little risk isn't enough to make me hesitate – in fact, I'm doing it now.

Alright, here I go, Anchor Hands!

Firing myself up, I begin climbing up the wall's surface along the tentacles I've extended to the roof. Mentally prepared to die, I climb the wall and pray that nobody sees me.

Lightning flashes with a loud sound in addition to the heavy rain; the weather couldn't be worse. But it doesn't cause me any trouble in climbing three floors. Even though my apprentice robe has absorbed plenty of rain and become heavy, it's fine. Really, my only worry is that someone will see me...

With my heart pounding unpleasantly, I reach the window of what should be Nell's room. Supporting my body with only my left hand that's grasping the tentacle, I quietly take a look inside.

I see, this window does indeed have its curtains drawn back. The preparations were perfect.

However, perhaps Nell is asleep; the lights are off. Hmm, I can't bring myself to wake her up if she's asleep.

In that case, I have no choice but to resort to plan number two that Will gave me. In other words, I have to quietly place my get-well gifts and a letter of encouragement next to her pillow.

Alright, let's go with that – but at that moment, I hear thunder. It's quite close; the flash of lightning is quite bright.

And then our eyes meet.

In the single moment that the inside of the room is illuminated, I see the pale face of a girl with shadows beneath her eyes.

The princess who has just woken up, whose hair is standing boldly in multiple directions, opens her eyes wide in surprise as she looks at me.

I wonder what I'm supposed to say at a time like this. I wonder what kind of face I'm supposed to make.

「Ah... Umm, good evening, Nell?」(Kurono)

In the end, I reply with the safest choice of words, along with a half-hearted, forced smile.

「Eh... Kurono... kun?」(Nell)

Nell's expression is one of true amazement, as if she can't believe her eyes. I suppose if you think about it normally, anyone would feel nervous if a man appeared at their window in the middle of the night.

No, if you think about it normally, I have a feeling that what I'm doing right now is terrifyingly absurd.

Uwah, now that I'm consciously thinking about it, I'm feeling even more nervous. Could it be that Will has set me up...?

「A-ah, I came to visit you, but... It seems I'm causing trouble for you, so I should go –」(Kurono)

「Wait!」(Nell)

Despite coming all this way, I say some pathetic words in a weak voice in an attempt to leave, but Nell interrupts me with her own shouted words.

It is not only the volume of her voice, but her actions that surprise me.

There are three consecutive noises that make up her reaction.

The first is the sound of Nell's wings spreading as she sits up in her bed.

The second is the sound of her blanket being flung to the corner of the room by her wings as they expand outwards.

And before I know it, Nell is standing right in front of me. What incredible speed of movement.

「Wait, please... I don't care if this is a dream or a hallucination, so please don't disappear from my sight...」(Nell)

Through the glass window, her gaze is directed towards me as if she is trying to cling on to me – or at least, I think it is.

The only thing I can see is my own face that has a bit of a stupid expression on it, because there's another flash of lightning behind me. This weather phenomenon that happens right behind me turns the window's glass into a mirror.

That's why I can see my own face. I'm sure Nell is looking at her own face right now as well.

And a moment later, the glass turns transparent once more and I see the face of a princess just a few dozen centimeters away from me.

As I hear the rumbling sound of thunder immediately after the lightning, I notice that Nell's face has changed completely.

I thought her face looked quite tragic, but now her face has turned considerably red from embarrassment. She's opening and closing her mouth like a goldfish as if completely shocked – her reaction is like she's just noticed a huge failure on her part.

「N-no! Actually, no! You can't right now, no, don't look at me, please don't look at me when my face looks so terrible, hyih!」(Nell)

She places her right hand in front of my face, and in the next instant, the curtains are drawn shut by her left hand. And so, Nell rejects me.

Mission failed. This is Kurono. Mission failed, Colonel Will.

And then I speak my words of defeat.

「Sorry. I'll go back after all.」(Kurono)

「Wait, Kurono-kun! Please, just wait a moment! Five minutes – no, one minute, no, thirty seconds, I beg you from the bottom of my heart, just wait a little!」(Nell)

Judging from the fact that the order of her requests is a little strange, it seems that Nell is a little panicked, but... Hmm, well, considering that she asked me to wait, I suppose my visit has been accepted.

「A-alright. You don't really have to hurry that much, so you can calm down and prepare or whatever you need to do.」(Kurono)

「Wah, ah, ah – I need to wash my face – What should I do – Toilet – Where did I leave my comb – What should I do, there are only ten seconds left –」(Nell)

As I hear her voice intermittently through the closed window, I realize that she didn't hear me at all. I wonder just why she's in such a hurry.

But, well, Nell is a girl of that age, so I guess she needs to make certain preparations before letting someone into her room. I'm sure that her unkempt bed hair and defenseless negligée are things that she would be particularly unwilling to let someone of the opposite sex see. Girls are really conscious about their own appearance; guys can't even compare. Not that guys disregard their own appearance entirely, though.

In any case, I decide to wait patiently until Nell invites me in. Holding onto my tentacle three floors up, looking like an exceptionally suspicious individual.

Nell, can you hurry and let me in... If someone sees me, I will most certainly die in a social sense...

Chapter 370

Note from the translator: This chapter was delayed because of its absurd length. Due to the length, it will count as both a regular and sponsored chapter.

Enjoy!

Yoshi

「– But I’m glad that you’re looking healthier than I thought.」(Kurono)

「Uu... Y-yes...」(Nell)

For some reason, Nell is lying face-down on her bed as she responds to my remark, as if she’s embarrassed.

After being beaten by the rain for dozens of minutes, I’ve successfully been invited into Nell’s room, wiped my drenched body with a towel and broken the ice with safer topics of conversation such as,「How are you feeling?」

The fact that she was hastily running around and making various preparations allowed me to confirm that she wasn’t weak to the point of being unable to get out of her bed.

Still, the sense of relief I get from actually seeing her face-to-face and having her tell me that she’s fine with a cheerful smile is something else entirely.

「Your face doesn’t seem too pale, either.」(Kurono)

「Haah... P-please don’t look so closely...」(Nell)

I guess it’s embarrassing for her to have her face stared at when she’s lying down because she’s ill. She covers her face with both hands to block my gaze, and at the same time, her wings wrap around the top half of her body. What a lovely, impregnable defense.

「Oh yeah, here, eat this if you want.」(Kurono)

From my shadow, I produce a small paper bag bearing a logo of a smiling woman. This is the get-well gift that Will recommended to me.

「Ah, could that be a custard pudding from『Sweet Smile?!』」(Nell)

「Yeah, I heard that you like these.」(Kurono)

To be more precise, I「read」it. Will really showed off his ability to gain information in that letter.

「Yes, I love these! Thank you very much, Kurono-kun!」(Nell)

There is a smile covering Nell's entire face – no, I can even see signs of tears glistening in her eyes that have faint shadows beneath them. She is incredibly happy. If she's this happy about it, it's worth the effort I spent in buying the pudding.

It was surprising to learn that custard puddings are sold normally as well-known treats from Rune, but the length of the line of female customers outside the confectionary store called『Sweet Smile』was surprising as well.

I was the Nightmare Berserker standing in line with all of those young maidens. Man, it was really hard for me. Mentally, that is.

But the most surprising thing of all was the exorbitant price of 1500 Klans for a single small-sized cup. As expected of a store set up in the upper district; even the prices are high-class.

「Umm, can I... eat it?」(Nell)

「Of course, go ahead, go ahead.」(Kurono)

I give a cheerful reply, and then immediately wonder if it's alright for her to have such a sugar-filled item this late at night. Well, let's just pretend it won't be a problem.

「Ah, yes, I will prepare some tea. Kurono-kun, is there a brand of tea that you like in particular?」(Nell)

「No, you don't have to, don't push yourself too hard.」(Kurono)

Perhaps Nell's sudden enthusiasm comes from the fact that she is eating the custard pudding that she loves so much. As she smiles and cheerfully makes an attempt to get out of her bed, I stop her.

I've come here to visit someone who is ill; having her move her body in order to show me hospitality would defeat the purpose.

Also, I have no knowledge whatsoever about tea brands in a foreign world. The only thing I have is the resolve to gratefully accept whatever is given to me.

「No, it is really fine. Nothing is wrong with my body, and I will be able to depart for quests soon.」(Nell)

The gently-smiling Nell before me is the Nell that I know, through and through. Her face is a little pale, but she is full of the same vitality, energy and motivation as she had when she was in the Grand Coliseum's infirmary, making the decision to go and rescue the students at Iskia.

In other words, there's no stopping her.

「Ah, my cooking hasn't improved much, but I can at least make some proper tea!」(Nell)

I suppose tea is something that nobles and royalty are accustomed to. It's normally made by their servants, but on occasions on which they are hosting guests of equal social status, such as when they're having chats with noblemen from another nation or when new friends are visiting, it is not uncommon for the head of the house to personally make the tea. It's probably part of the etiquette needed for interaction between people of the upper-class.

Since Nell is a princess, she has probably been taught this quite strictly.

「Alright. Well then, I'll let you treat me to tea.」(Kurono)

I don't have any particular requests, so I'll leave everything to her. I guess her physical condition really is okay.

I look around the neatly-arranged room and exchange intermittent pieces of conversation with Nell for a few minutes while she prepares the tea.

「Here, I hope you enjoy this.」(Nell)

A tea set has been prepared on the small, round table in front of me.

The amber-colored tea that is steaming with an elegant fragrance is known as black tea in this world, too. I don't know whether the tea leaves and the method of making the tea are the same as on Earth, but its taste and aroma are exactly the same, and the options of adding milk or lemon are the identical as well.

There is a teapot with a lovely floral pattern, black tea being poured into a cup with a matching pattern, and a saucer beneath the cup. There is also sugar and a stirrer available as part of the tea set nearby.

It's quite the performance. Nell just told me a moment ago that she often has tea parties with Charlotte and Safiel, the female members of her party. It seems that she wasn't lying.

Though they're daughters of noble and royal families, laying out cushions on the floor and sitting around a table like this would indeed be very schoolgirl-like. Well, considering that Safiel is one of them, I have mixed feelings about it, though.

I have a strong image of her shutting herself in a Necromancy workshop full of skulls, completely absorbed in experiments with an evil smile on her face. This image is just a product of my own imagination, but I have the strange feeling that it might not be far off the mark.

「Thanks, itadakimasu.」(Kurono)

I'm a little embarrassed that she's staring at me with amazingly sparkling eyes as I drink my tea, but I do my best to feign composure. I gently try a mouthful of a tea, trying not to seem too greedy.

「... It's delicious.」(Kurono)

「I'm glad it suits your tastes.」(Nell)

Nell speaks earnestly with a gentle smile, exuding the happiness in the bottom of her heart.

The taste of the tea is indeed something I would call delicious without trying to be flattering, but I wonder why I just felt a little – no, considerably startled.

Calm down, it's not like Nell has the pure emotions of a maiden who has been praised and rewarded for the efforts she has made for the man in her heart. She is simply happy as a friend; she has no ulterior motives.

However, the scary thing about Nell is that if she shows me a pure expression like this, it really could cause a misunderstanding.

「By the way, why is there also a pudding for me?」(Kurono)

I attempt to change the topic in order to distract myself. Even if I wasn't doing that, the custard pudding with the『Sweet Smile』logo placed next to the black tea has been bothering me ever since I spotted it, though.

「That is something that I found in the cooler. I think it is something that someone brought for me as a get-well gift.」(Nell)

「Is it alright for me to eat it?」(Kurono)

「Yes, it will taste better when we eat it together.」(Nell)

Kuh, I begin to hate myself for immediately assuming that I would have this custard pudding that costs 1,500 Klans all to myself. Nell is a princess with overflowing affection. On the other hand, even though I've become a Rank 5 adventurer, I'm a frugal person of the lower-middle class.

「Ah, I will be eating the pudding that you brought, Kurono-san.」(Nell)

As Nell giggles, I find myself unable to think of the words to form an appropriate response. I suppose I'll just internally apologize to the person who bought her this custard pudding. Sorry, I'm going to be eating this expensive pudding.

「Well then, itadakimasu.」(Kurono)

「Yes, me too. Itadakimasu.」(Nell)

As expected of such an expensive product, the custard pudding is delicious. It's on a different level from the one I made using a vague recollection of the recipe. The custard pudding has probably undergone Rune's unique improvements since its manufacturing method was introduced by Count Redwing, also known as Akabane Zenichi-san. At the very least, it's a custard pudding the likes of which I never tasted in Japan.

As this thought runs through my mind, the white, expensive-looking spoon with white wings engraved into it hits the bottom of the cup. There's none left; the portion size wasn't very large.

I look up to see that Nell's spoon, which bears an engraved lightning bolt on it, is also scooping at the empty air in her own cup.

「M-my apologies, I was a little hungry, so...」(Nell)

As if embarrassed that she finished her pudding at the same speed as my greedy pace, she shows some truly innocent, bashful behavior as she makes an excuse that I never asked for. Damn it, Nell looks about thirty percent cuter now... I need to clear my mind.

And so, Nell and I enjoy our night-time snack together. Conversation between us flows naturally, just like the time we spent every day together before we went to Iskia Fortress.

Perhaps because her boredom has accumulated from all the time that she's spent in bed, Nell is more talkative than usual.

Reminiscing about her childhood, the first time she met Will, the emotions she felt when she was bestowed a divine protection, the story of the failure of her first quest. Also, the other desserts she likes, the restaurants she is fond of, the subjects she is good at, the lessons she dislikes and all kinds of other silly topics.

During this, I suddenly remember something important.

「— Come to think of it, I forgot to thank you.」(Kurono)

「Thank me?」(Nell)

Nell tilts her head slightly to the side as she repeats my words. The timing I was supposed to say this is really off, so I suppose I can't blame her for not knowing what I'm talking about.

「It was thanks to you that Iskia could be saved. Thanks for lending me your strength.」(Kurono)

「Eh, that's... I just... did the natural thing, so...」(Nell)

Nell has an expression that's as if she's more surprised by me thanking her so formally rather than the timing of my gratitude. Indeed, considering her kind disposition and impressive abilities, that might have been the natural thing for her to do.

But even so, I wanted to thank her properly.

「No, if it wasn't for the charm you gave me, the『Aria Guard-Feather』, I would have been parasitized by the Sloth-Gil.」(Kurono)

Come to think of it, does Nell know about the Sloth-Gil, the parasite monster that was controlling the Greed-Gore?

For now, I give her a brief explanation and emphasize how much danger I was in as I thank her.

「Really, thanks. You saved my life, Nell. If I was on my own, I wouldn't have been able to save anyone. No, even the Curse Carnival wouldn't have ended well for me. If you didn't save me, I wouldn't have been able to do anything...」
(Kurono)

「Fufu... Ufufu, it's alright, Kurono-kun. You don't have to try to do everything perfectly on your own.」(Nell)

Despite intending to thank her, it comes out as more of a complaint. Nell speaks with a gentle smile, as if she's really a goddess.

No, it's not just her words. She is leaning over the table and has taken my hand, wrapping it in both of hers. It's the gesture of a real saint, extending her hands to a lost lamb.

「Companions rely on each other and save each other, don't they? So it's fine for you to rely on me more, Kurono-kun. I want to become your strength.」(Nell)

I think of Lily, Fiona and now Nell as well, as companions that I can trust with all my heart, but... maybe I've been trying too hard to shoulder everything on my own.

Taking advantage of someone and relying on them are different things. Even though I understand that, the line between the two might be really blurry.

「You're really saving me by saying that.」(Kurono)

「Me too, hearing you say that... has saved me.」(Nell)

Nell's hands squeeze my hand a little harder. Her delicate, white fingers entwine warmly with mine. I wonder if me being startled is because of my impure thoughts.

No, there likely isn't a single man alive who wouldn't feel overly conscious while being stared at by Nell's vivid blue eyes. It's not my fault. It's not my fault, but... I need to control myself.

Concluding that any more than this would be dangerous, I make a casual attempt to shake my hand free, but it seems that things won't go as planned. Nell's hands continue to gently restrain my right hand.

「Kurono-kun...」(Nell)

Is it just my imagination? Her eyes are a little moist, as if she is feeling feverish. As I avert my eyes, trying to escape her gaze –

「– Princess Nell?」

I shudder as I hear a knock accompanying a woman's voice. The warm atmosphere that has been filling the room up until now disperses in an instant. Nell's grip on my hand is also released instantly.

Who is it? No, no matter who it is, this is bad. This is very bad.

It seems that Nell understands the situation as well; she has opened her eyes wide in astonishment. There's no doubt that she is wearing the same expression of surprise as me.

After all, I'm not someone who is supposed to be in the women's dormitory, let alone the room of a bedridden, ill princess.

It would have been bad if I was witnessed infiltrating the room with my tentacle-climbing, but it would be even worse for me to be seen in this room. I'd be caught red-handed and arrested. The authorities probably wouldn't hear my excuses.

「You are resting, aren't you... I am coming in, alright?」

「Don't come in if she's supposed to be resting!」I shout at her in my mind, but that isn't going to make the woman on the other side of the door to give up on rushing into the room.

Damn it, now that's it's come to this, I have to escape even if I have to smash through the window. The moment I come to this decision and stand up –

「Kurono-kun, please hide here!」(Nell)

Nell displays her fine skill in shouting while whispering. The hiding spot she's pointing at is her bed.

Indeed, Nell is raising her blankets and asking me to hide in there.

Th-this is... I have a feeling that being discovered not only in the same room, but in the same bed as her would cause an even more irreversible situation.

If I'm found in Nell's room, I'd be executed. Being found in her bed would likely add some torture before the execution.

But by no means is breaking through the window in order to escape the best plan. On top of that, I can't see anywhere else I could possibly hide. Damn it, I'd be able to hide in that closet if I was Lily-sized!

Even as I think that, I can hear the rattling sound of the door being unlocked by the woman who is trying to enter the room for some unknown reason. This is bad, I don't have any more time to think.

「Kurono-kun, quickly!」(Nell)

「Kuh!」(Kurono)

Making up my mind, I leap towards – not the window, but the bed. Clinging to the sliver of hope that I won't be discovered at all.

「Fuwah... Wah, ah... Kurono-kun...」(Nell)

「Sorry, Nell, bear with it for a bit.」(Kurono)

As I slip into the blanket, we naturally end up in a position where we're embracing each other. Of course, my head isn't sticking out. It's not sticking out, but because of that, my face is touching Nell's chest. No, it's not simply touching it; it's more like it's pressing against it.

The pair of large hills that push up against her pure-white negligée are wrapped around my face. I experience softness, warmth, a scent and a slight difficulty in breathing. My heart, which was already sounding its alarm bells at this dangerous situation, begins beating twice as fast.

I don't want to separate myself from her, but at the same time, I do. But I wouldn't be able to do so anyway. Nell is holding me tightly against her chest, showing no signs of intending to let go. I think I'm going to go crazy.

「Excuse me.」

At the culmination of my tension, as my ability to reason reaches the brink of collapsing, the woman finally steps into the room. I desperately hold my breath, erase my presence and simply pray whole-heartedly that this danger will pass. Ah, this reminds me of when I escaped the experiment facility and was being chased by Sariel...

「Oh my, the lights have been left on! And the tea has been left out like this... Good lord, what a rude person your last visitor was.」

She's probably a student who lives in this dormitory, taking care of Nell who is resting. There's no doubt that it's soon to be bedtime for the dormitory, and she came to check up on Nell one last time.

However, as I hear the tone of her voice that is clearly displeased at the state of the room, I realize that the owner of this voice is undoubtedly Helen, the one who tried to lynch me under the pretense of challenging me to a duel.

I see, she's the captain of Princess Nell's guards; since she's a daughter of some super-important family, she's in a sufficient position to take care of Nell. In fact, judging from the way she worshipped Nell, I'm sure she's doing this of her own desire.

Well, that loyalty is tormenting me and Nell right now. I accidentally scared to hell out of her at the arena, but damn it, Helen, you really have seized the opportunity to kill me...

「... Leave.」(Nell)

「Princess Nell?! You were awake?」(Helen)

Nell begins her ad-lib acting in order to overcome this predicament. Though I know it's an act, I'm startled in a bad way upon hearing her speak in a tone that sounds really displeased; I can even hear traces of hatred in her voice.

「I don't care. Hurry and leave.」(Nell)

「I-I'm terribly sorry... Please excuse me...」(Helen)

Upon receiving a heartfelt rejection from the master whom she loves and respects, Helen departs with these clearly sad words of apology.

Since I was born, my heart has never felt more at ease than now as I hear the

sound of the door closing and being locked once more.

The room remains silent, and several dozen seconds pass.

「... Nell, isn't it safe now?」(Kurono)

「Uu... Kurono-kun, Kurono-kun...」(Nell)

I should hurry and separate myself from her. I spoke out to Nell thinking that it would be safe to leave her bed now, but her restraint on me doesn't loosen. I wonder if she's confused because of how nervous she was.

「Hey, you can let go of –」(Kurono)

「Fuuuuuuuh!」(Nell)

「C-calm down, Nell, it's alright, everything's alright now.」(Kurono)

Doing my best to calm the strangely agitated Nell, I gently escape her embrace while feeling an insolent reluctance to do so and slip out of her bed.

I finally experience the sensation that I'm still alive. At the same time, as I slip away from Nell's incredibly attractive body, I realize just how embarrassing the immoral situation we were in a moment ago was.

「U-umm... Kurono-kun, I...」(Nell)

Nell's face has been dyed a magnificent red from nervousness and shame. I'm so embarrassed that I can't look her in the eye right now. I'll become conscious of it even if I don't want to.

Feeling heat in my own face, I keep my eyes averted as I speak.

「You saved me, Nell, thanks. You managed to somehow deceive her successfully.」(Kurono)

「Yes... You... are right.」(Nell)

Honestly speaking, this really saved me. I'd completely abandoned the notion of hiding in her bed as I'd thought that there would be no way that two people being in the same bed could go unnoticed.

「To think that your wings would come in handy in a time like this.」(Kurono)

Indeed, the secret behind how Helen was tricked lies in Nell's wings. The trick

was plain and simple. When Nell is lying face-down, her large wings are above her, of course. They have considerable surface area and volume even if she folds them, and if she moves them a little, she can naturally create a space large enough to hide a person.

By nonchalantly holding her blanket up with her wings, she made my hiding beneath it inconspicuous.

「I am happy that I could be of help to you, Kurono-kun.」(Nell)

Out of the corner of my vision, I see Nell squirming around, covering her face with both hands. Perhaps she still can't think straight because of how nervous she was; it seems that her agitation won't subside.

But now that the danger has passed, I realize something. When I was hiding under the sheets, couldn't I have avoided the risky situation altogether by submerging my body in my Shadow Gate? Yes, the same way that I hid myself in the wooden crate of apples on the ship headed to the Pandora continent.

It's way too late now, but since I managed to make it through the situation safely regardless, I'll just accept it.

「Sorry for overstaying. Me staying here is dangerous, so I'll go back now.」(Kurono)

「Ah... Y-you are right... I understand.」(Nell)

Hearing Nell speak in a remarkably disappointed tone, I'm tempted to suggest that I stay longer, but I really can't do that after experiencing that danger.

「You seem healthy, Nell, so it looks like you'll be able to return to the academy soon at this rate.」(Kurono)

「... Ah! Y-yes, that's right, that's right, isn't it! I am fine; I will be able to go back to attending the academy starting from tomorrow!」(Nell)

「I see, that's good to hear. With that, we'll be able to see each other at lunchtime or after school or whenever.」(Kurono)

「Yes, I... am always with you, Kurono-kun...」(Nell)

As Nell directs a feverish gaze at me, I feel insolent feelings stirring within me once more. This is bad, if I don't get out of here as soon as possible, I have a bad

feeling I'm going to do something I'm going to regret.

I hurriedly make my way towards the window. Just as I steel my resolve to leap out into the pitch-black, thunder-filled night once more, I suddenly remember something.

「Oh yeah, Nell, can you teach me magic again sometime?」(Kurono)

I learned something during the experiments with my divine protections a few days ago.

In order to make full use of『Overgear』and『Over-Accel』, I need an accurate understanding of the spell formulas for『Protect Boost』and『Concentration Boost.』

With『Force Boost』as the base, I have a clear image of the spell formula for『Overdrive.』Compared to the other two, its activation and effective duration are more stable and the backlash on my body isn't as harsh.

Thanks to my special training with Mia-chan, I was able to activate the second and third divine protections intuitively even without any image of the spell formulas.

But if they're that unstable and exhaust my strength so relentlessly, I'd feel very anxious about using it in real battles. Especially if I'm going to be taking on the Apostles as my opponents.

While I need to look for the next divine protection, I also need training to ensure I can make proper use of the divine protections I've already acquired.

Well, it's a rather pathetic that I'm relying on Nell for this, though.

「Yes, of course! Ah... But among your party members, there is a, umm... witch, isn't there?」(Nell)

Nell's favorable response makes a complete reversal, and she suddenly frowns.

I see, from her point of view, there would be no denying that it would seem like she's intruding by teaching me magic while I ignore my party members who are proficient with magic. Jeez, what a considerate princess she is.

「No, it has to be you, Nell.」(Kurono)

「Eh... I-I am... I am special?」(Nell)

「Yeah, I can't ask anyone but you, Nell. It would be completely impossible for anyone else.」(Kurono)

Indeed, for teaching me about modern magic, there's nobody better than Nell, who is good at teaching and is able to directly guide my mind through telepathy.

After receiving such wonderful one-on-one lessons, I can't bring myself to go through Fiona's indecipherable, tricky lessons. Lily's out of the question as well, since she's only able to use her own Characteristic Skills.

「Yes, yes! Thank you very much, Kurono-kun, I'll do my best!」(Nell)

I'm the one who's supposed to be saying thanks. But Nell, whose motto is that things should be done for the good of the people, accepts my request, finding happiness in being of use to me. Considering that her wings are fluttering restlessly, I guess she's really happy about it.

「Thanks. Well then, see you tomorrow. Good night.」(Kurono)

「Yes, good night, Kurono-kun.」(Nell)

And so I depart Nell's room. I leave the women's dormitory as quickly and silently as when I came.

As I head back to the dormitory, being struck by the heavy rain once more, I suddenly realize something.

「Come to think of it, Nell was just fine when I saw her, but she's been bedridden all this time...」(Kurono)

Considering her condition, she would probably have been fine to start attending the academy starting tomorrow even if I hadn't gone to visit her. I didn't get the feeling that she was suffering mentally from something on her mind like Will told me, either.

The battle of Iskia was hard; maybe even people like Nell want to skip school and take it easy from time to time.

「Well, since she's fine, it doesn't really matter.」(Kurono)

Coming to this conclusion, I return to the dormitory in a good mood after having one of my worries resolved.

Note from the author:

Nell has acquired 『Kurono's used spoon!』

→Use

Discard

Cancel

Chapter 372

「... The ancient Demon King, Mia Elroad, isn't it?」

「Welcome to the continent of Pandora, White Hero Abel.」(Mia)

As there is no meaning in concealing his identity any longer, the man in the gray robe removes his hood. His exposed face is that of a masculine, handsome man with shining blonde hair and blue-and-black odd-colored eyes. He is the second Apostle, who has traveled a great distance to the continent of Pandora after receiving the prophecy*.

TLN*: This word is 神託/shintaku which dictionaries define as “oracle”. The word is used a lot in chapter 163, where Shikkaku has used “oracle” but I believe in this context it means “prophecy”, whereas in English “oracle” more often describes people who make the prophecies. I’ve also translated it as “divine message” in Death Mage depending on context as well.

「I never expected that I could witness this.」(Abel)

「The same goes for me. I never thought I would see a hero act like an assassin.」(Mia)

He faced the young child with black hair and red eyes. One of the black gods, the ancient Demon King, Mia Elroad.

「It is only in legends that heroes shine. There is no glory in the path I walk; there never has been, nor will there ever be.」(Abel)

「You're a serious person, aren't you. There's not a single good thing that will come out of serving that kind of god, you know?」(Mia)

「I have known that for a hundred years.」(Abel)

The hero and Demon King both have cynical smiles on their faces.

「So, what will you do? Are you still planning to take this child's life?」(Mia)

Mia asks this question while looking straight at Abel, not even glancing at Nero who has collapsed on the ground.

「It seems my guess was incorrect; there is no meaning in killing him now. And I cannot even touch him at this point, can I?」(Abel)

「As expected, it seems that becoming the second Apostle causes your perception to become extraordinary. If you had stepped forward one more centimeter, I would have been able to shoot you down for trespassing on the Elroad Empire's territory.」(Mia)

This place is unmistakably a plaza in Spada's academy district. But at the same time, it is also the dominion of the ancient Elroad Empire.

「An Apostle wouldn't do something as foolish as stepping into the territory of another religion's god.」(Abel)

Indeed, Mia is one of the black gods. The moment he appeared, that place turned into a god's realm.

Gods cannot directly interfere with the real world that people live in. But naturally, in the world of the gods, they are able to exercise all of their powers without limit. No matter how strong a person is, there is no way someone with a mortal body can defeat a god.

Nothing about the plaza's appearance or scenery has changed, but a phenomenon that transcends dimensions has taken place.

Beyond an invisible line that is a centimeter in front of Abel's foot is the world of the gods, subject to divine laws. The place he stands is still within the real world that has been constructed by natural laws.

This plaza has now become a boundary between the realm of man and the realm of gods.

「Well then, I'd be grateful if you just leave quietly now.」(Mia)

「That was my intention from the beginning. If that prince is not the new Demon King, I do not have any other leads. I will leave Spada tomorrow morning.」(Abel)

「I'm glad you're honest, so I'll let you go with one Black Ballista.」(Mia)

With a carefree smile on his face, Mia finishes speaking. At that moment, the hero Abel's chest bursts open. There was no incantation for an offensive spell

or any casting motion. There wasn't any sign of a spell being cast at all. In fact, the explosion was so sudden that it would be easier to assume that Abel had cast Apoptosis* on himself.

TLN*: This is a really weird use of the word apoptosis... the kanji below it reads "Self-destruction magic."

Burnt pieces of flesh are scattered across the ground and a cloud of vaporized blood rises.

A clean hole has been opened right in the center of Abel's chest. It is large enough that Mia is able to see straight through it.

No matter how anyone looks at it, this is a fatal wound. Abel doesn't even let out a single groan of pain as he collapses face-up on the spot he was standing.

The faint, ominous, black-red flashes and crackling sound coming from the corpse are the only traces left behind by the Ancient Magic spell called『Black Ballista.』

「... It seems I was not able to deceive the eyes of a god after all.」(Abel)

Abel's voice echoes a moment later. His mouth is not moving. His voice is coming from the empty space directly behind the corpse.

「What an elaborate Doppelganger, to even produce a corpse.」(Mia)

「It is weaker to make up for that, however. I could not make even the smallest reaction to that attack.」(Abel)

As Abel's voice speaks once more, the corpse on the ground is surrounded by a dazzling glow, and then it turns into light particles and vanishes.

At the same time, a completely healthy, unharmed Abel appears in the empty space his voice is coming from, radiating the same white light. His appearance is the same; he is still wearing a gray robe. Absolutely nothing about him has changed; it is as if nothing unusual took place at all.

「Now then, I shall take my leave, ancient Demon King. I will pray that we never meet again.」(Abel)

「Goodbye, white hero. If you meet your god, make sure to tell him to give up on Aria.」(Mia)

And so, Abel departs and Mia returns inside the obelisk.

Only the prince of Avalon, collapsed and getting beaten by rain, is left behind.

「Atchoo!」(Nero)

「Oi, what's wrong Nero, do you have a cold?」(Kai)

Nero sniffs lightly as he tells Kai, the friend who is poking fun at him, to shut up.

「You did come back completely drenched last night. Where were you hanging around without even using an umbrella?」(Kai)

「Ah... Is that what happened?」(Nero)

「Are you still half-asleep?」(Kai)

Kai is making fun of Nero for once. Nero's mind seems a little dull from having just woken up; he shakes his head in an attempt to regain his wits.

Huh, seriously, what was I doing last night again?

Nero remembers wandering into Spada's town at night with an inescapable feeling of disgust in his chest, but in the end, he is mostly unable to remember what he did there.

All he did was wander the rainy town aimlessly, but he can only recall it vaguely.

In fact, he even gets the feeling that he didn't wake up until the moment he sneezed just now. He clearly understands that his memory is cloudy right now.

Well, whatever...

Nero yawns and abandons that train of thought. What he should be doing now is not thinking, but eating.

This is the cafeteria in the Royal Spada Academy's main building. In the morning, the boarding students gather here and eat their breakfast. It is quite crowded, but it is a rather more elegant meal than lunchtime, when the entire student body comes here to eat.

In the corner of his vision, he can see the Second Prince Wilhart, sitting at a table on his own in an incredibly refined manner. Everything is just as it should

be; this is a normal scene of breakfast.

No, that's not right. There's still something that hasn't gone back to normal...
If Nell's not, here, I –

「But man, I'm really glad that Nell is feeling better. With this, the sis-con onii-sama's troubles are resolved!」(Kai)

Kai laughs cheerfully as he stuffs his cheeks with freshly-baked white bread with no regard for manners, but Nero's retort doesn't come.

「... Huh? What did you just say?」(Nero)

「Hmm? Why are you making such a scary face? You're such a bad sport, Nero, though that's nothing out of the ordinary. Look, speak of the devil. Oi, Nell, Safi, over here!」(Kai)

「It's still morning, you're so loud, you idiot. Don't talk with your mouthful, actually, just don't talk for the rest of your life. It's unpleasant. Good morning, Nero, it's a lovely day, isn't it?」(Safiel)

「Don't go saying so many bad things about people and then saying, 'it's a lovely day,' as if nothing happened!」

Kai shouts in protest, but Nero takes no notice of even that.

He is captivated. Of course, it is not because of Safiel's lovely smile and morning greeting.

He gazes at the young woman with white wings behind her as if he can't believe his eyes.

「Ufufu, Kai-san and Safi are getting along well as usual. Ah, Onii-sama, good morning.」(Nell)

This is a reproduction of an everyday scene of Wing Road right before the open-field exercise. The foolish Kai, the foul-mouthed Safi, and the one watching their quarreling with a gentle, dazzling smile is –

「... Nell.」(Nero)

Nell Julius Elroad. Nero sees his younger sister, who is smiling like a saint.

She is wearing not the *négligée* that Nero kept seeing her in recently, but the

academy's black blazer and red cape. He does not need someone to explain that she is attending the academy now.

「What is the matter, Onii-sama? You have such a blank expression on your face. Could it be that you are still half-asleep?」(Nell)

She says the exact thing that Kai did a moment ago, but the completely different nuance of her sentence is likely due to the elegance exuding from her beautiful face.

An ordinary man would be charmed by that smile, but she is Nero's blood-related younger sister. He is accustomed to it rather than captivated by it.

TLN: Tiny play on words here as the Japanese words for “be accustomed to” and “be fascinated by” are really similar, 見慣れる/minareru and 見惚れる/mihoreru.

Nero finally understands that the Nell before his eyes now is not the Nell who was bedridden with a sickness in her heart, but a Nell who has completely returned to her normal self.

「No, that's not it, Nell! Are you alright now?!」(Nero)

The younger sister gives a cheerful smile as she responds to her older brother, who is so flustered that he has half-risen out of his seat.

「Yes, I am fine now.」(Nell)

As Nell gives a reply as if nothing had ever been wrong at all, though this was exactly what Nero wanted, he cannot help but to be dumbfounded.

The severe troubles in Nell's mind have been resolved so suddenly without any intervention from Nero at all.

Nero cannot help but to feel more let-down than happy.

「I-I see... No, since you're alright, it doesn't matter...」(Nero)

Nero lets out a deep sigh, wondering just what he has been worrying for. He is curious about exactly what has happened to his sister's body overnight, but he doesn't care about the reason now.

Whether she is aware of Nero's complex feelings or not, she takes her seat

next to Safiel with an innocent look on her face.

「Now once Sharl comes back, Wing Road will have made a complete revival.」
(Kai)

Kai speaks optimistically as he drains the potage that has been poured into his bowl. All of the members present have long since stopped commenting on the fact that he doesn't use the provided spoon for drinking his soup.

「Sharl is receiving His Majesty's training – er, rather, his guidance, so I suppose she will not return from the royal castle for another month or so.」
(Safiel)

「Ah, I suppose she wasn't forgiven for leaving the fortress by herself after all.」(Kai)

「Oh my, it is surprising that you understand that she was at fault for acting on her own.」(Safiel)

「Even I can read the mood and understand that much!」(Kai)

As Nero watches the noisy argument between the swordsman and the necromancer, his tension slowly returns to normal levels.

「It would be good if she got her selfishness corrected.」(Kai)

「His Majesty had quite the serious look in his eyes. I'm sure she'll come back all depressed, so make sure you console her gently, on top of her bed.」(Safiel)

「Stop making those kind of jokes this early in the morning.」(Nero)

「No, Onii-sama. Such treatment really does give energy, so please do it for her.」(Nell)

「... Huh?」(Nero)

An unexpected opinion. As incredibly difficult as it is to believe, it has come from Nell, the embodiment of purity.

Nero asks her what she means, but Nell simply giggles and smiles, leaving him speechless. For some reason, he experiences the same feeling as when he hears Safiel's derisive laughter when she is hiding her evil intentions.

「W-well, for now, let's just relax and wait until Sharl comes back. I'm not in

the mood to go on quests anytime soon anyway.」(Nero)

「No, I have to get stronger so I can beat that guy, so let's keep accepting more dangerous Rank 5 quests!」(Kai)

「Yes, I want to find the Wrath-Pun that slipped out of our grasp, too.」(Safiel)

「No, wait, you guys didn't bring down the Wrath-Pun?!」(Nero)

The clumsy, bright interactions between companions.

There were so many things going on in Iskia that Nero hadn't had the time to worry about things such as what had happened to Safi's servant that had been taken over by the parasite. Nobody could blame him for not having heard about this before.

「Kai was so disappointing that... Even with me and Sharl there, he couldn't cover us properly.」(Safiel)

「Oi, don't mess with me! It's because you said something reckless about how you wanted to recover it so I shouldn't injure it too much –」(Kai)

「Shut up, a weakling who got knocked out by one punch from the Nightmare Berserker shouldn't complain.」(Safiel)

「Guhah!」(Kai)

Taking a blow to a sensitive area, Kai has no choice but to fall silent. He stays quiet, but the pace of his eating doesn't change. An infinite combo of white bread being soaked in potage.

「I understand the situation, but –」(Nero)

「Onii-sama. I want to accept difficult quests and improve myself as well.」
(Nell)

With Nell's words, a majority consensus is reached.

Nell is showing a strange amount of enthusiasm considering that she is supposed to be recovering from illness. Nero's worry for her is greater than his feelings of bother about choosing to actively accept quests.

「Nell, don't push yourself too hard. Even in Iskia, things worked out well in the end, but we would have all been wiped out with one more mistake.」(Nero)

「Yes, that is exactly why, Onii-sama. I want to become stronger; I want to become more useful – After that battle, I have come to realize that I need to be stronger.」(Nell)

From time to time, Nell becomes incredibly stubborn. No, as her older brother, Nero knows that she has simply hardened her resolve.

Nell is certainly not a pure princess who has had a sheltered upbringing. She is studying abroad in Spada, acting as an adventurer and possesses a strong will to do what must be done.

That is why Nero has been supporting her decisions at times like these. No matter how troublesome or difficult it was. As her older brother, as a man, he responds to her wishes.

「... Okay, I got it. Well then, starting from tomorrow,『Wing Road』will resume work.」(Nero)

Chapter 371

Note from the translator:

Like last chapter, this chapter will count as two chapters due to its length. Enjoy!

Yoshi

「... Shit.」(Nero)

Being struck by the heavy rain that suddenly began to fall after the sun went down, Nero curses under his breath for the umpteenth time; he has lost count of how many times he has done so.

What is he angry at this time? Is it the fickle autumn weather, or the fact that his glorious red cape has grown heavy after being soaked by the rain? Everything is unpleasant to him.

What am I... doing...

He cannot bring himself to visit Nell again, and yet he is not in the mood to quietly return to the men's dormitory. However, aimlessly wandering about the streets of Spada's town isn't particularly interesting, either.

Displeasure, dissatisfaction – no, the emotion growing more violent in Nero's chest is the anger that has no place to escape to.

Nell was heartbroken. Nero was forced to realize that there is not a single thing he can do for his younger sister who is more precious to him than anyone else.

Anger at himself for being so powerless. And the anger at the culprit who has driven his sister to madness.

Neither of them can be resolved right now. This is a problem in Nell's heart; there is no way Nero can resolve it.

Now that he thinks about it, this is the second time in his life that he has worried about something so helplessly.

How did Nero get back onto his feet that time – He gave up, no, he had decided that something like that was unnecessary to him in the first place.

That is precisely why that previous experience is of absolutely no use here. Abandoning Nell as「unnecessary」is not something he can ever do as an older brother, as a prince and, most importantly, as a proud man.

Would it have been better if I picked a fight like that idiot Kai...? No, I would have seriously killed him...

Even if he killed his enemy, nothing would change; nothing could possibly change. There would be no meaning in venting his anger in such a way. If Nell didn't return to her usual bright, smiling self –

「Nero Julius Elroad, isn't it?」(Man)

Hearing a man's voice suddenly call out his name, Nero's consciousness returns from the loop of thoughts running through his mind, back to the real world.

The first thing he sees when he looks up is an enshrined black lithograph against a background of dark clouds. Ancient letters written with faint light are dancing on its surface.

It is the『Zero Chronicle』, the obelisk upon which literature praising the greatest of his ancestors in Pandora's history, the ancient Demon King, is etched.

It seems that Nero has walked into the plaza near the academy.

「Sorry, you're mistaking me for someone else.」(Nero)

Nero doesn't know who it is, but he isn't in a tolerant enough mood to deal with this person.

「... I see.」(Man)

Taking no notice of the man's flat-toned whisper, Nero continues walking straight ahead – or tries to, but he suddenly stops after a single step.

With the hard sole of Nero's loafer planted firmly in a shallow puddle on the stone pavement, a moment passes, and then he turns around.

「You bastard, who are you?」(Nero)

Bloodthirst rises from Nero as he suddenly becomes very cautious. His hand is not on the handle of his trusty blade, but he is alert enough to slay his foe in a single instant if needed.

As Nero turns around, he finally sees the man's figure properly.

He is wearing a gray robe with a hood pulled low over his face, making it difficult to discern what kind of expression he is wearing. He is tall and even through his robes, Nero can see that his muscles have been trained more than the average person's.

However, that alone doesn't make his appearance particularly conspicuous. If he were mixed in with a crowd of Spadan people, he wouldn't draw anyone's attention.

Unlike Nero, this man with an incredibly plain appearance is not emitting any bloodthirst or hostility. Of course, he is not making a single suspicious move, nor is there any sign that he is casting a spell. He is simply standing there, being struck by the heavy rain.

「You've cleared the people out quite enthusiastically. If I wasn't so perceptive, I wouldn't have noticed.」(Nero)

There is nothing unusual about the gray man. However, there is a suggestive hypnosis barrier set up around the entire plaza that prevents people from naturally approaching it. It has been concealed in a sophisticated way so that even Nero, who has a keen sense for detecting presences, only barely noticed it.

The fact that this man is standing inside such a barrier is more than enough to make things clear. The culprit behind this suspicious, elaborate set-up is none other than the man in the gray robe.

Nero examines the man, staying alert for the possibility that the man may have allies hidden elsewhere who could strike from one of his blind spots.

However, the man simply stands still and opens his mouth to continue speaking quietly.

「I want to ask you just one thing. Will you become the Demon King?」(Man)

「... Huh?」(Nero)

A question that is beyond astounding. Nero wonders if it is a ploy to get him to lower his guard, but there are no signs of any surprise attacks.

Ten seconds pass with complete silence other than the sound of rain. Finally, Nero responds.

「I might become the king of Avalon, but the Demon King is something I won't become. Ever.」(Nero)

It is an absurd question, but Nero gives a clear「No」for an answer. He would reject normal questions with a vague,「Who cares?」but this was one question that his pride wouldn't forgive him for if he didn't give a clear answer.

「As the descendent of the ancient Demon King, Mia Elroad, you are the most likely candidate. Even if you have no intentions of becoming the Demon King, destiny may not allow that – just like me.」(Man)

「Don't be stupid – UOH?!」(Nero)

A completely unconscious, reflexive defense.

Before he realizes it, Nero has drawn the『Spirit Blade「White King Cherry Blossom」』and raised it to stop the dull-gray blade that is now right in front of him.

「Not a bad reaction.」(Man)

The man's tone is somewhat pompous, as if he is commenting on the quality of a painting. They carry the nuance that Nero detests the most in words directed at him, but his mind is overcome with astonishment rather than anger.

When the man attacked, Nero had been completely unable to see the man's movements.

「Damn... it... Don't fuck with me!」(Nero)

With the two blades locked, Nero pushes back against the man. No, the man has merely taken a step back of his own will.

「Jeez, what a pain. I don't know what organization has sent you to

assassinate me, but don't think you're going to be taking my head. And while you're at it, don't think you're leaving this place alive.」(Nero)

Making random threats as they occur to him, Nero warily observes his opponent.

Neither the man's appearance nor the atmosphere around him have changed, other than the single sword he is holding. Nero has no idea where the man was carrying it or when it was unsheathed.

From the looks of it, the sword is a mass-production model that is widely-used in Spada. It doesn't have any Enchantments; the material it is made of cannot even be called high-quality steel.

Despite that, though it was only a single strike, this man has exchanged an equal blow with a national treasure, a magic sword wielded by the Rank 5 adventurer Nero, using this sword of the lowest grade.

All of the alarm bells of Nero's sharp intuition have been set off. He knows that his foe is stronger than him.

But at the same time, this runs through his mind.

If it's experience in defeating opponents more powerful than me, I've definitely got plenty!

「— Instant Flash.」(Nero)

Nero's martial skill, released in a heavy vertical swing rather than the horizontal direction he normally uses, scores a deep gash in the stone pavement of the plaza. However, it does not accomplish anything more.

Tch, he saw through my attack completely.

The man evades it successfully by taking a mere half-step to the right. It is more like a calm movement than the evasion of an attack; it is as if he knew that the attack would strike that exact spot beforehand.

Nero's initial impression is correct. The man did not see through Nero's attack in the instant it was released, but rather saw through the entire attack completely.

These movements, it's more than just sharp instincts. He understands every

single one of my movements, or he has an ability to ‘read’ equivalent to that old woman’s*... Shit, it’ll be a real pain to take this guy on.

TLN*: The kanji beneath “old woman” reads “war maiden”, giving some indication as to who he’s referring to.

As Nero feels an increasing sense of danger, the man who easily dodged his attack begins moving once more.

His body moves to release an attack, his powerful footsteps and stance that leaves no openings making it clear that he is a first-class swordsman, but – Nero can see it.

This guy’s underestimated me and isn’t using his full strength!

If this man made his movements in earnest, they should be able to overcome Nero’s vision and even his instinctive predictions. Nero realized this with the man’s first attack.

However, for the one with inferior ability, such carelessness is the most effective chance to defeat a superior opponent.

Nero is not naïve to let such a perfect opportunity slip away, nor can he afford to do so.

「Single Flash!」(Nero)

The technique Nero chooses to meet his foe with is the most fundamental of martial skills,『Single Flash.*』

TLN*: The author has finally included furigana for this skill, indicating that is supposed to be read “Slash”. I’m going to continue to use Single Flash (the kanji meaning) to avoid confusion.

It is not that Nero has chosen a weaker attack to match his opponent not using his full strength.

It is basic, but because of that, it is versatile and extraordinarily easy to use. There is no problem whatsoever in using it with just the sword in his right hand.

One-on-one battles are not determined through firepower alone. Nero possesses more than enough raw power to kill his opponent.

The『Single Flash』, which has had Nero's own original improvements made to it from his dual-wielding style, has plenty of sharpness to kill this man, who is unmistakably a human.

But there's no point if it doesn't hit –

The『Single Flash』that would be fatal on contact is evaded easily by the man who has once again seen through Nero's attack completely.

The horizontally-swung white blade sweeps meaninglessly over the man's head, just a single centimeter above his gray hood.

Nero, who has just missed an attack with his martial skill, must look full of openings to the man now. He is a suitable prey, no different from a wooden practice dummy.

The prided weapon in his right hand has already lost its strength, and his left hand is completely empty.

His bare left hand can fend off his opponent's counterattack with Ancient Jujutsu, but it is difficult to imagine that it will work against this man who has now clearly shown the difference in ability between himself and Nero.

Nero has used up all of his options – making the man think that is Nero's plan.

The man's longsword is being held aloft. Before it can move, Nero releases his second attack.

「– Let your energy flow,『Thunderclap.』」(Nero)

Nero activates one of his original『Blade skills.』The golden color of the magic circle that appears on the back of his hand indicates which element is about to manifest itself.

That element is lightning. An incredibly fast element. Of course, the skill is cast as fast as possible as well.

As Nero quickly thrusts out his shining left hand, a Force Edge of fierce lightning materializes in it.

「Falling Flower Purple Thrust!」(Nero)

The martial skill, which can only be used with『Thunderclap』, is unleashed in a

thrusting motion. Nero's upper body bends backwards slightly as he releases his attack at point-blank range.

The thrust alone would be enough to pierce through a solid boulder, but with the blade of lightning, the martial skill produces even greater effects.

The moment it appeared, the weapon was shaped like a single-edged, slightly curved katana, but its shape changes as Nero's martial skill is released. No, it might be more appropriate to say that it explodes.

Just like Charlotte's『Line Force Blast』, the blade of purple lightning flies out and mows down everything in front of Nero.

Indeed, it is more like a short-ranged area-effect magic attack than a『thrust.』

If the attack covers all available space, there are no gaps through which it can be evaded, no matter how well the man can read Nero's attacks.

But you're going to dodge it anyway, right!

The only place for the man to escape to is directly in front of Nero as he releases the martial skill. The absolute closest of distances, closer to Nero even than his left hand that has been thrust out away from his body.

As if responding to Nero's expectations, the man shows no sign of fear at Nero's thundering thrust and takes a broad, spectacular step forward into the safety zone.

No matter how skilled the man is, it seems that maintaining his attacking stance while performing this superhuman evasion was difficult. His sword is no longer held aloft and he has dived to Nero's left side, as if collapsing there.

Nero has missed his first attack, the『Single Flash』, and his second,『Falling Flower Purple Thrust』, has been slipped through. Meanwhile, the man has lost his chance to attack as well as his balance.

Which of them has more of an opening?

In reality at least, the man is the one who makes the next move first.

「!」(Nero)

The man has grabbed a hold of the Nero's left wrist, next to

the『Thunderclap』in his hand.

The man is no longer holding his own sword. It is clear that his weapon would be useless at this super-close distance, where the two of them can reach each other with their hands.

In this moment, he has chosen to discard his sword and engage in unarmed combat.

I knew it would come to this – no, I knew you'd come this far!

A small-fry would have died to Nero's『Single Flash.』An experienced opponent, to『Falling Flower Purple Thrust.』But more powerful foes would overcome both deadly attacks and reach Nero's side – Indeed, Nero has expected all of this from the very beginning.

「Got you!」(Nero)

Nero grabs onto the man's right hand, which is grasping his left wrist, with his own right hand.

He let go of the『Spirit Blade『White King Cherry Blossom』』when he released his『Falling Flower Purple Thrust.』As a result, Nero discarded his weapon at the exact same moment his opponent did.

And now is the true chance that Nero has been waiting in anticipation for.

「First Technique – Flow!」(Nero)

The finishing move Nero has decided on is from Ancient Jujutsu. A fundamental technique that controls the opponent's strength, turning it into Nero's own attack. Of course, like Single Flash, it is both powerful and versatile. That is why it is considered a fundamental technique.

The flow of power generated by the man's hand – judging from its sensation, Nero realizes that this man is probably capable of overcoming him with brute strength.

The man's movements are standard for someone who has grabbed a hold of his target. However, the muscular power he is using in those movements rivals that of the power-obsessed Kai. The abilities of the man, who is proving to be astounding even in raw physical strength, know no limits.

Even so, no matter how much power he possesses, he cannot break the principles upon which the Ancient Jujutsu of the Demon King is based.

This technique merely follows the principle:「It is better to bend than to break.」It is not an unarmed fighting technique. It is a master technique, a「martial skill」, that controls pure power, the physical kinetic energy, with the body and then utilizes Mana to perform vector manipulation.

In addition to efficiently nullifying the opponent's power, it uses magical energy control to produce a powerful counterattack that is impossible with physical methods alone.

Just like when the enormous Rank 5 adventurer charged at Nero, only to be easily sent flying with a single hand.

Even this man's power cannot compare to the attack Nero received from Gustav in the Adventurers' Guild in Iskia Village

It is well within the limits of what Nero can control with his current ability. His technique is executed successfully; mistakes are impossible from this point.

In the next moment, the man's body slams heavily against the rain-drenched stone pavement with enough force to split it apart – or at least, it was supposed to.

「– Second Technique – Reversal.」(Man)

Huh? What did this guy say just now –

Nero is unable to comprehend what happens to his body at that moment. No, it is more appropriate to say that he is「unable to believe it.」

In that moment, the kinetic energy that was supposed to flow into his opponent reverses in an instant. Indeed, back towards Nero.

「– GAHAH?!」(Nero)

Nero simply witnesses this impossible reality.

The one whose body strikes the solid stone pavement is not the man, but him.

At a glance, it may appear as if the man simply threw Nero to the ground with

pure strength.

Nero's back slams hard against the ground and his red cape that acts as proof that he is a management cadet wraps itself around his body. The stone surface his body lands on collapses heavily, and the surrounding pavement crumbles slightly as well.

The stone cracks and a cloud of dust rises from the impact. However, a single shadow crosses that smokescreen with terrifying force.

It goes without saying that it is Nero's body.

He does not simply strike the ground again. Just how much destructive force has Nero been thrown with? He bounds off the pavement and flies into the air once more.

As his body flies weightlessly through the air, the gray stone pavement – no, the black lithograph is waiting for him.

Before Nero's body is trapped by the restraints of gravity and enters freefall, the enormous obelisk, which measures ten meters by three meters, catches him as if it is the cold hand of the Demon King himself.

「... Guh... Haah, agh...」(Nero)

Nero can only cower and exhale in pain before the solemn, ancient relic, the『Zero Chronicle.』

How ironic it is that the Demon King's distant descendant is crawling pathetically in front of a shrine dedicated to him.

「Your martial skills, magic and unarmed combat are not bad. How impressive it is for you to be this capable at your age.」(Man)

Nero can only faintly hear the man's voice, but his words are 'unpleasant' enough to get on his nerves.

Damn it... He's looking down on me...

In Nero's blurry vision, he can see the man approaching him calmly.

The man hasn't picked up his sword; he is still unarmed. But even so, Nero can only imagine that it would be incredibly simple for him to deal the finishing

blow on a defeated opponent, even with his bare hands.

Nero's anger outweighs his fear. However, the reality is that the damage his body has sustained isn't so light that emotions alone can help him get to his feet.

「But the fact that you did not use your divine protection from the beginning is a failure brought about by your youth. If you are an adventurer of the highest rank, you surely must have one –」

「... Don't... fuck with me...」(Nero)

However, the man's careless words incur Nero's wrath.

Nero witnesses a flashback to an unpleasant memory in his mind. His foolish self that earnestly admired the Demon King when he was still a child. The child who was oblivious to the pain, humiliation and emptiness that would await him at the end of all of his hard work.

Now that he remembers this, this time, the burning anger is enough to move his body. His mind surpasses his body.

「Don't fuck with me! Who the fuck would rely on gods?!」(Nero)

「– It's okay to rely on me for now.」(Man)

The moment Nero stands up boldly, a somewhat foolish-sounding sentence comes from somewhere, denying his words. It is as if a child is playing a prank – no, the voice is indeed high-pitched and soft enough that it can only be imagined to belong to a child.

「What, who –」(Nero)

Nero turns towards the direction the voice came from, in other words, behind him. As he expected, he sees a single child there. But his eyes open wide in astonishment.

This child has come out from inside the black lithograph, the『Zero Chronicle.』

He looks more closely to see that the ancient, everlasting white characters engraved on the obelisk, have begun shining with a deep crimson color. He also notices that their arrangement has changed significantly.

They now form what is unmistakably a magic circle. The circular shape formed by the blood-red ancient letters completely cover its enormous, pitch-black canvas.

The child smoothly emerges from the center of the magic circle through the black stone monument like a ghost, and with a quiet「Whoopsie-daisie」comes down to stand right next to Nero.

「A real hero came out to a place like this, so I have no choice. Just this one time, okay?」(Child)

The mysterious child looks down at Nero with an innocent expression as he speaks.

He has long, silky, flowing black hair and round red pupils. Nero has no memory of seeing this young, adorable child before. The child is wearing a male academy uniform, but Nero can't remember seeing a student like this around.

However, he has noticed something impossible about the child's appearance. He has become aware of it.

「Black hair and red eyes... Could it be?!」(Nero)

「It's exactly as you think it is, but... Sorry, just like your sister Nell-chan, I'm going to have you forget me as well. Ahead of you is the realm of the gods that people must not step foot in, you see –」(Child)

As the child's crimson pupils flicker in a bewitching manner, Nero becomes unable to avert his gaze. It is as if he is being drawn in by them against his will. In the next instant, even his conscious thoughts change from「I must not look」to「I must look.」An overwhelming coercion.

However, that might be only natural. If Nero can figure out the enormous identity of this tiny child – but before that, Nero becomes unable to maintain consciousness any longer.

「Damn... it... What's that... supposed to mean... I don't get it...」(Nero)

As his consciousness recedes rapidly, the only thing that Nero is capable of is watching as the man whose name is unknown confronts the child whose name is known to everyone.

Chapter 373

The morning of the 9th of Blue Moon. The main road of the upper-class district beyond Spada's second wall is crowded with people commuting to work or school.

As I step aside to avoid an enormous Golem dressed up in a suit, my shoulder lightly bumps into that of a gray-robed man who appears unexpectedly from behind the Golem.

「Sorry.」(Kurono)

「Oh no, it was my fault.」(Man)

We stop for a moment to exchange words of apology. We only bumped shoulders; it would be abnormal for an argument to start over it.

I try to begin walking again as if nothing's happened, but –

「Umm, is there something wrong?」(Kurono)

I feel a sharp gaze coming from the robed man. He has black and blue odd-colored eyes and beautiful blonde hair... Guh, as much as I hate to admit it, my ideal of a high-level handsome face is peeking out at me from beneath the man's hood.

It's not a delicate face like Nero's that looks like a soft mask; it might be more appropriate to say that his masculine face is heroic than to say that it's handsome. It's the kind of face that would receive more praise from men for being「cool」than from women.

「I thought I recognized you... No, my apologies, it seems I have mistaken you for someone else.」(Man)

「Huh, I see.」(Kurono)

I suppose that's true; I've never seen his face before. I'm sure I'd never forget such a handsome man. His odd-colored eyes and blonde hair make a really memorable color combination, too.

Ah, now that I think about it, his colors are the exact opposite of mine. I

suppose it's to be expected of a foreign world; there are humans with strange appearances everywhere.

「Hey, what's wrong?」(Lily)

「Ah, sorry, Lily. I'm coming now.」(Kurono)

Lily, who was wondering why I've suddenly stopped, pulls on my robe forcefully.

As I'm pulled forward, I start walking again.

As I turn around and look back, I see that the gray-robed super-handsome man has already disappeared on the other side of the crowd.

「What terrible congestion. The center of Elysion's town was like this as well.」
(Fiona)

Munching on her breakfast of skewered meat with a bored expression on her face, Fiona follows us, one step behind.

Seeing her stuff her cheeks with the heavy meat dish that is dripping with juices, I can see that her stomach is in fine shape today as well.

Though I look at her fondly, I do have one worry.

「Be careful of the juices dripping. You're wearing new clothes, after all.」
(Kurono)

「It's alright, this is a present from you, Kurono-san, so I won't put a single stain on it.」(Fiona)

I'm wearing an apprentice's robe and Lily's wearing the black one-piece dress she always wears; Fiona alone is the only one who is wearing something different from usual.

She's wearing a one-piece dress with a different design to Lily's. It's not black, but pure-white. It's made of a different material, too. It's not Ancient Velvet, but a magic fabric called Valhalla Silk. Still, it can be called a high-class material that's worth just as much.

This expensive, white, one-piece dress is a present I gave to Fiona to celebrate our party reaching Rank 5 as well as to express my thanks.

The first objective of my shopping trip yesterday was to find this present. These kinds of things should be sorted out quickly.

Still, when I see Fiona wearing casual clothes like this, it reminds me of the time the two of us went out. I was startled to see her in clothes different from the ones she normally wears.

「What is it, Kurono-san, you're staring at me... Do you want some of my skewer? I would not hesitate to offer you some if it's just one mouthful, but –」
(Fiona)

「No, I was just thinking that it really suits you.」(Kurono)

It's already the middle of autumn, so she'd have been cold with just a one-piece dress. She's put on her own light-blue cape, matching the color of her hair.

Well, I think that a beautiful girl would be nice to look at no matter what she wears.

「I-I see... That's, thank you...」(Fiona)

It seems that Fiona prioritizes her appetite over her sex appeal*; she gives me a cold response and looks the other way as she continues stuffing her face with the skewered meat. Ojou-san, the way you're eating is a little too wild.

TLN*: This is a small play on words as 食い気/kuike meaning appetite and 色気/iroke meaning sex appeal are similar-sounding.

「Muuh! Kuono, What about Lily! Does this dress suit Lily?!」(Lily)

「Yeah, of course it does, you're very cute. You're the cutest, Lily!」(Kurono)

Lily giggles with an expression that shows her delight at having been praised. My words were referring not to the black one-piece dress that she always wears, but the shoes on her feet.

The magical pair of shoes called『Fairy Dance Shoes』, Enchanted with Speed Boost, Light Way and Feather, are the present that I gave Lily.

I gave her the White-pun robe last time, so it would be nice to give her something different, but Lily doesn't wear much equipment. Oh yeah, shoes are something she can wear all the time, alright, let's go with this – As a result of

this shallow train of thought, I bought these shoes without caring about their price.

Worthy of their price, their magical effects are not at all inferior to the Ancient Velvet one-piece dress and their design is adorable. An essential pair of shoes for a stylish, high-Rank female adventurer that increases both maneuverability and feminine charm... or something like that. That's what the store's employee said.

In fact, as I watch Lily showing off its effects, moving smoothly as if she's skating, I can see that the effects of Feather are working properly.

Well, to a modern Japanese citizen like me, she just looks like a child on rollerblades. I'll tell her later not to skate inside stores.

「– Still, the Adventurers' Guild over here is busy in the morning as well, huh.」
(Kurono)

One way or another, we reach our destination. As indicated by my exasperated remark, the building directly in front of us is the Adventurers' Guild. This is not the academy district branch that has served us until now, but the main headquarters in the upper-class district.

Even the district branch is a magnificent stone building that rural Guild branches like those in Irz Village and Alzas village couldn't compare to, but this place is even more amazing. Its appearance can be summarized with one word, 『temple.』

I suppose the only building I've seen that comes close is the academy's great library. Carved pillars stand in a line, and the same statues of warriors and female knights that I've seen at the academy's front gate as well as the throne room of the royal castle have been placed here for show. The walls and stairs have been decorated scrupulously with even the most minute details, making me realize it would have taken an incredible amount of time and effort to build them – no, it might be more appropriate to say that I'm overwhelmed by the thought of it. I feel just like a tourist. Ordinary Japanese people would feel the urge to click away with their cameras.

「Noblemen and wealthy merchants are pointlessly enthusiastic about submitting requests to the headquarters, so they're strict about who's allowed

in among people who aren't adventurers, aren't they?」(Fiona)

「That's why there are things called 'easy quests', Lily knows these things, you know!」(Lily)

Well, for Lily and Fiona who are inhabitants of this foreign world, I suppose this temple-like building isn't anything out of the ordinary. They're making shrewd comments from the adventurers' point of view.

Hmm, if I hadn't come to the headquarters on my own yesterday, things would have turned out quite embarrassing for me as I would have been the only one to be restless. Mhmm, it seems that being prepared is important when it comes to anything.

「Tanomo~!*」

As Lily opens the double-doors, she shouts this phrase that she probably doesn't really understand. As Fiona said a little while ago, the entrance is quite busy; it's packed with people who didn't look like adventurers, talking loudly and walking around restlessly. Though Lily has raised her voice a little, nobody takes notice of her.

TLN*: Google tells me this is something shouted by warriors in the Edo period entering the dojo when challenging opponents or something. Tamamo has found another source that suggests it is a cute/funny way to say "excuse me" or "forgive my intrusion" or something like that.

But it's kind of... The atmosphere here is more like a station's platform in rush hour than an Adventurers' Guild. All of the people walking around look like businessmen. In fact, though people in Spada don't wear neckties, there are middle-aged men wearing Spada's traditional ceremonial clothes all over the place.

I'm relieved to see a large man wearing a suit of armor and a helmet with a greatsword on his back, who is unmistakably an adventurer.

If it's an Adventurers' Guild, there's no way that I, as a Rank 5 adventurer, should be out of place. Convincing myself of this, I step boldly through the wide entrance.

Today's objective is to accept an easy quest – no, a proper Rank 5 quest.

「After all, the best way to confirm your strength is to see it during quests, isn't it?」(Fiona)

Indeed, what we『Element Masters』need is to confirm our current strength.

I've acquired the second and third of my divine protections, of course, but Lily and Fiona have also been bestowed divine protections and gained new powers. I don't know the details of their abilities, and they don't know about the powers of my divine protections yet, either.

「Yeah, it'd be great if there was a really good extermination quest.」(Kurono)

Our aim is to enter a proper Dungeon and clear the boss in its deepest chamber, as orthodox adventurers should do. We'll fight a variety of monsters in a variety of situations, master the use of our divine protections and think of ways to coordinate the use of our new abilities. We can't be happy just because we've all powered up. In order to stabilize our party's fighting strength, we need a suitable amount of practice.

「Well then, I'll go and ask at reception first.」(Kurono)

「Then Lily-san and I will go to collect our rewards.」(Fiona)

The other thing we've come here for other than for a quest, or more like the most important thing, is to finally collect our reward money for completing the emergency quest and also the money being paid to us by the nation of Spada.

They've thought this through, consolidating it into one payment paid through the Adventurers' Guild.

Of course, my greatest concern is the worldly-minded one of just how much we're going to receive.

「Yeah, I'll leave it to you.」(Kurono)

「Yes! Leave it to Lily!」(Lily)

And so, I entrust Lily with money in the hundreds of millions as I head towards the quest accepting counter in high spirits.

Whether it's the district branch or the headquarters, the purpose of the counter the receptionist is sitting at is no different, but the counter here feels more high-class, or rather, I feel like there's a more elite atmosphere floating

around it.

Uwah, that person somehow looks just like Erina –

「... Actually, that's really Erina, isn't it?」(Kurono)

I see a familiar beautiful Elf woman, smiling pleasantly at those around her. She has chestnut-colored hair in a chignon bun and her eyes are sky-blue. Most importantly, the sight of her in the Guild uniform that I'm used to seeing is a perfect match with my mental image of Erina the receptionist.

「Welcome to the headquarters of Spada's Adventurers' Guild.」(Erina)

As if noticing my intense stare, she gives me a small wave along with her usual magnificent smile. It seems that she's just become free, too, so I'll make use of her.

「Morning, Kurono-kun.」(Erina)

As I approach her, Erina speaks not in formal language, but a relaxed tone. I wonder if it's alright for her to talk like that while she's working, but that's resolved by the partitions on either side of the reception desk.

There are barriers set up to prevent sound from passing through them, acting as privacy protection for things like the personal details of high-Rank adventurers, consultations and the contents of requests. There are small, inconspicuous magic circles drawn on the corners of the thin partitions.

In any case, there's no need to hesitate to have a chat with Erina now.

She's an acquaintance, no, I'll call her my friend. I'll use that relationship to ask her for a variety of information about quests, monsters and all kinds of other things. Maybe she really will introduce me to an easy quest...

「Yeah, morning, Erina.」(Kurono)

With these petty things in mind, I give her a greeting that seems normal on the surface. Well, Erina, as an elite receptionist with maxed-out communication skills*, might be able to see through my superficial ulterior motives.

TLN*: I think in Japanese, this term also includes the ability to tell what people are thinking.

「It's kind of been a while, hasn't it? I saw you at the parade, but I couldn't call out to you.」(Erina)

「I-I see... That parade, you were watching it...」(Kurono)

Uwah, she saw that painful, disgraceful scene that frightened the people instead of making them rejoice. Whatever impressions you got from that parade are wrong; that was because the Nightmare Merry was scaring everyone. It's definitely not my fault.

「Yes, you were very cool! It seems that there still aren't many people who can appreciate your charm, though?」(Erina)

「Ah, thanks. It makes me feel better to hear you say that.」(Kurono)

「Fufu, I know. You look like a berserker on the outside, but you're surprisingly delicate, aren't you?」(Erina)

Amazing, it's like Erina has actually seen through me.

We haven't been friends for long; it was only very recently that we met at the academy by coincidence and became on good enough terms to speak to each other informally. To think that she would understand me so well despite that.

Though I feel happy, I'm surprised by her communication skills. If she told me that she actually has telepathic abilities on par with Lily's, I think I'd believe her.

「By the way, why are you at the headquarters, Erina?」(Kurono)

「My work has been acknowledged and I was promoted to work at the headquarters!」(Erina)

「Ah, congrats!」(Kurono)

「That's the official reason, but it's actually because I have a private connection with the new Rank 5 adventurer, the Nightmare Berserker.」(Erina)

「... Huh?」(Kurono)

「In other words, I've been ordered to keep an eye on you.」(Erina)

No way, what for – or so I wonder, but now that I think about it, Will said it, didn't he? That Rank 5 adventurers attract attention from both the nation and the Adventurers' Guild.

In other words, keeping an eye on the movements of Rank 5 adventurers and gathering as much information about them as possible is considered important enough to make Erina work at the headquarters just because she's acquainted with me.

「But is it alright to actually tell me that?」(Kurono)

「I'm not being asked to act as a spy. I don't intend to investigate your secrets, and the same goes for the rest of the receptionists and the other staff. We want to become on more friendly terms with capable Rank 5 adventurers and build bonds of trust. From the adventurers' point of view, gaining the trust of the Guild gives access to various conveniences, the Guild doesn't have to be wary of everything they do and they can live a smoother adventurer's lifestyle.」(Erina)

Rank 5 is nothing if not proof that one possesses vast strength. The Guild wouldn't be able to trust or feel secure about powerful adventurers if it simply treated adventurers in businesslike ways without knowing anything about them.

But if the Guild and powerful adventurers trusted one another, the adventurers would work harder with the Guild's support, providing a relationship of mutual benefit.

「I see, I understand the reasoning behind it.」(Kurono)

「It's good that you understood so quickly. So as long as you get along with me even better, everything will be fine, Kurono-kun. How does it sound? Simple, isn't it?」(Erina)

Spending time with Erina in private isn't something I'd hesitate to do, and more importantly, having a friendship with such a beautiful woman is something that I, as a sensible man, should welcome.

She did go out of her way to explain the Guild's intentions; it would probably be worse for me to reject her out of suspicion. That would really cause unwanted misunderstandings.

I'm often misunderstood in the first place. There would be nothing better than for me to show off my friendly side before my reputation spirals downwards. I have to stop my label of the『Fiendish Tentacle Man』from

spreading in the academy no matter what!

「Ah, if it's like that, then I'll be counting on you.」(Kurono)

「Mhmm, it's good that you're working with me. I'll make sure to report to my superiors that you're cooperating.」(Erina)

Erina speaks in a light tone with the last syllables in her sentences lengthened. Seriously, please take care of me.

「So now that we have the opportunity, how about having lunch with me today? To celebrate your promotion to Rank 5, I'll treat you. Ah, I'll put it down as an expense, so you don't have to hold back or anything –」(Erina)

「I see, then I would certainly enjoy being treated to a meal.」(Fiona)

The voice that immediately responds to Erina's attractive offer of a meal is extremely familiar, or rather, it's the voice of the girl that I was exchanging words with just a little while ago.

「Fiona... what are you doing here?」(Kurono)

With an expression of surprise and exasperation, I direct this question to the ojou-san who is sticking her face in here from the side.

「I suddenly changed my mind. I have left the collection of our rewards to Lily-san.」(Fiona)

Fiona speaks nonchalantly. There's not a single trace of ill will in those white cheeks, only drowsiness. Of course, what she truly desires is food, not sleep.

「Excuse me, dear guest, but please do not cut the queue.」(Erina)

Erina speaks firm words of warning directed at the sudden intruder. Her expression is stiff now, as if the smile that she was wearing while speaking to me was just an illusion. I can see how firm and brave she is. There's no mistaking that her ability to fight is nonexistent, but even so, she refuses to falter before a Rank 5 adventurer.

「Kurono-san, shall we use this opportunity to go to the Sushi store? Since this receptionist is apparently treating us.」(Fiona)

「... I wonder if you could stop ignoring me, rude guest.」(Erina)

Fiona looks indifferent, as if the woman before her is nothing but a wallet, while Erina's cool expression breaks down in anger. Her thin eyebrows are twitching.

「H-hey, calm down, Fiona. Sorry, Erina, give me a minute!」(Kurono)

I grab Fiona and turn around. I turn my back to the angry-looking Erina and ask what Fiona's true intentions are in a small voice.

This place is a little cramped because of the partitions; our faces are close. But I don't care about that right now.

「What are you thinking, coming in so suddenly?」(Kurono)

「Are you familiar with the phrase,『honey trap』, Kurono-san?」(Fiona)

I'm not dull enough to be oblivious to suspicion that is written all over Fiona's face.

「That's... Aren't you just being too cautious?」(Kurono)

「You're naïve, Kurono-san. To think that you would be convinced by such an explanation.」(Fiona)

「You've been listening since then?!」(Kurono)

What about the soundproof barriers?!

「No, I could not hear it, but I have a rough idea of what you were talking about. As an adventurer, I am several years your senior, Kurono-san.」(Fiona)

Indeed, Fiona has been working as an adventurer since her school days in the Sinclair Republic. Which means that for an experienced person like her, the explanation that was given to me earlier would probably be common knowledge.

「No matter what kind of facade the Adventurers' Guild may put up, it is composed entirely of relationships that purely consider benefits and costs. There is a risk that they may take advantage of your goodwill. It is standard practice to always be prepared to use the Guild for your own benefit.」(Fiona)

I-I see... Indeed, I might have accepted Erina's words too easily.

I'm sure they weren't completely false, but that doesn't mean that she

explained all of the Guild's intentions. The Guild won't lie, though. In summary, they'll give me just as much information as I need and no more, and hope that I misunderstand in a way that benefits them.

「So you're trying to say that if I'm too honest with them, there's a risk that they'll take advantage of me in a way that suits them, right?」(Kurono)

「Yes, that is how it is. From what I can see, that receptionist is the type that you cannot let down your guard against.」(Fiona)

Still, it bothered me earlier. That receptionist... she is someone whose life we saved, but Fiona doesn't seem to care about that.

Well, a capable adventurer like Fiona fights dangerous monsters and evil bandits all the time, and saving people is something she's accustomed to. I suppose she can't remember all of the faces of the people she's saved.

「And so, I will take over from here.」(Fiona)

Take over, which means, umm... Oh yeah, we came to accept a Rank 5 quest. Anything is fine as long as it's suitable for us to test our abilities, so I don't have any problems with leaving it to Fiona's choice.

I'm not so completely convinced by Fiona's words that I'd push Erina aside, but, well, I suppose it's fine in this case. It seems that things will end amicably, too.

「Alright, I'll let you do it.」(Kurono)

「Yes, please leave it to me.」(Fiona)

「Make sure you do get along with Erina, alright? It wouldn't do us any good if the Guild kept an eye on us, either.」(Kurono)

「I will handle things carefully.」(Fiona)

Is it just my imagination? It's kind of like her golden pupils are swimming. Well, whatever. I believe in you, Fiona.

With that, I tag Fiona in and head straight for the payment counter where Lily is probably handling her first errand of receiving the large amount of money.

「Well then, Erina, let's have our meal together some other time.」(Kurono)

「Eh, no way, Kurono-kun?!」(Erina)

「Now then, receptionist, please introduce us to a Rank 5 quest.」(Fiona)

Fiona stands in front of the counter with a daunting pose, as if to be in the way between me and Erina.

Though I feel sorry that I ended up rejecting Erina's offer to have lunch, I leave without turning to look back.

「Ah, by the way, do you like this one-piece dress? It is a sincere gift that Kurono-san gave to me.」(Fiona)

「Kuh, ngh... You... witch...」(Erina)

As Fiona starts boasting about her one-piece dress as if she's really taken a liking to it, Erina lets out a truly frustrated-sounding groan for some reason. I'm curious about the conversation between those two, but the moment I step outside the soundproof barrier, I immediately become unable to hear them.

Now then, I wonder just what kind of quest Fiona is going to choose.

Quest – Lich Extermination

Reward: 15,000,000 Klans

Time limit: Three months from accepting the quest

Contractor: The Adventurers' Guild

Contents of request: The appearance of a Rank 5 Undead monster known as a 『Lich』 has been confirmed in the deepest part of the 『Revival Catacombs.』

The Lich, which is an extraordinarily dangerous monster that appears once every ten years, controls the Undead monsters in the Dungeon and in the worst-case scenario, leads its subordinates outside to attack areas inhabited by humans.

An immediate extermination is requested.

This is the quest form that is handed to me by Fiona half an hour later.

Chapter 374

The general of the Crusaders' noble faction, Count Bergunt, is feeling impatient.

「— When will the demons' rebellion die down! What is Liuchrome doing? Isn't he taking a course that will intensify the rebels' actions rather than suppress them?」(Bergunt)

Because of the rebellions caused by the remnants of the Daidalos army all over the region, Bergunt is unable to give the go signal to take the Galahad Fort.

The Alzas Fort has already been completed, and soldiers and materials have been replenished. Preparations for war are being made. Or rather, they have already been made.

「Our army has taken responsibility for the suppression of the rebellions that occurred in the western region of Daidalos, near Alzas. It was only a disorderly mass of unintelligent demons, after all, so our losses were minor —」

It costs money to even move an army. However,『time』is more precious than a small amount of war funds.

「... There has already been a large deviation from the original invasion plan. The Crusaders' flag should be flying at Spada's royal castle by now, never mind Galahad! Because of the insolent demons running rampant, we have not set out foot out of Alzas!」(Bergunt)

Such foolishness, Bergunt thinks as he scratches his head in irritation through his neatly-combed, dark-green hair.

「Apparently in this eastern region of Pandora where Daidalos lies, a considerable amount of snow falls in the winter. We might see the first snow of the season in around a month.」

Bergunt is in such a foul mood that his subordinates would hesitate to approach him, but the voice talking to him is doing so in an incredibly light tone.

「What kind of careless things are you saying, Bishop Gregorius-dono! It will

be too late, far too late if we wait for spring!」(Bergunt)

The reason this man is giving a faint smile, as if he hasn't read the mood at all, is because he holds the position of Bishop, which is superior to Bergunt's position of Count.

Bishop Gregorius, who is in charge of the large army that has been dispatched to Pandora by Cardinal Mercedes, narrows his already-narrow, foxlike eyes as he gives an indifferent laugh.

「It's fine, we can simply attack during the winter without waiting for spring to come, can't we?」(Gregorius)

「Impossible!」(Bergunt)

As the Bishop speaks irresponsible words as if talking about someone else's problem, Bergunt's voice grows even angrier.

「Attacking a fort on a snowy mountain in the middle of winter, even if our enemies are mere demons, would be beyond foolish!」(Bergunt)

Does the Bishop not know what the words "difficult winter" mean? Even a first-year student at a knights' school would understand the dangers of conducting war during winter.

「But if there is no time, then we do not have a choice, do we? If we stay here and wait for spring, we would preserve our troops, but I wouldn't be so sure about your head.」(Gregorius)

Ultimately, this is the reason Bergunt is so concerned about time.

Bergunt has not come to Pandora on an expedition by himself. The noble families of the Sinclair Republic colluded and dispatched him as an ally to the army, so that they aren't simply obeying the Church that has successfully occupied Daidalos.

What the noblemen of the Sinclair Republic desire is a swift occupation of another nation's territory, just like how the Crusaders, led by the Seventh Apostle Sariel, forced Daidalos to surrender with a single maneuver. There are various reasons and purposes behind this, but in short, there is no mistaking that all of them are born from the wretched human desire of wanting profits as

soon as possible.

Count Bergunt was aware of this; in fact, it was he who promised that things would end quickly when he became the general.

And so, he took the burden of the noblemen's expectations on his own shoulders and came to Pandora, bringing an army large enough to capture forts.

However, if he waits until next year's spring, that would mean that over half a year after his arrival, he would have only made preparations for battle without any results to show for it. No matter what reasons gives, they wouldn't satisfy the noblemen of his country.

There is no doubt that Bergunt would be dismissed for being incompetent and a new general, another nobleman proud of his skill in battle, would take his place. His successor would take the Alzas Fort that Bergunt has poured his blood, sweat and tears into building, as well as the tens of thousands of unharmed troops and the stockpiled military supplies, and quickly begin the battle to capture the Galahad Fort.

There wouldn't be any meaning in that. Making all the preparations and then having the good part taken by someone else could be called the work of a servant, no, a slave.

He is proud that he has made perfect preparations for capturing the fort, but nobody acknowledges the value of his work. Without victory in battle, his abilities and achievements will never be recognized.

「Kuh... I suppose it means that there is no choice but to begin now after all...」
(Bergunt)

It is too dangerous to simply leave the demons' rebellions. In the worst-case scenario, the Alzas Fort might be taken just as all efforts are put into the invasion.

If things turned out that way, not only would Bergunt's army be annihilated after being trapped between the remnants of Daidalos's army and Spada's army, but in the worst-case scenario, the demons would recapture Alzas and use it as a base to plot a comeback.

In other words, the Crusaders' occupation of Daidalos would be at risk. That

would be damage that could not be passed off and forgiven as the mistakes of a single general.

However, if he sat here and waited, he would be unable to avoid his own ruin no matter what. With that being the case, the clear choice was to take a risk and bet on chance.

It is a bitter decision, but a look of determination appears on Bergunt's face.

「Ahaha, what are you so flustered about, Count Bergunt? I have taken the effort of coming all the way out here to solve your troubles, haven't I!」
(Gregorius)

Gregorius literally laughs away Bergunt's resolve. His eyes are as if he is looking at a young man suffering in worry over trivial things.

「I have heard of the『White Sacrament...』However, there is no way that borrowing questionable soldiers created through questionable experiments could form the basis of a solution.」(Bergunt)

The two of them are currently in the fourth research laboratory of the Church's research organization, the『White Sacrament』, that was built using the Geofront of the Media Ruins located in the outskirts of Daidalos.

This crude room made of hard stone is inadequate for hosting high-class individuals like a Bishop and a Count, but considering that it was originally part of a Dungeon, it is actually quite hospitable.

The chairs that they are sitting and facing each other in, as well as the tables upon which documents have been scattered, have been designed with practicality in mind; the room doesn't have a single decoration.

In fact, it is the Bishop's sparkling robe and the Count's smart military uniform that look flamboyant in this pointlessly large room that can hardly be called a drawing room.

Even so, Bergunt has made the long journey from the Alzas Fort with the aim of borrowing the soldiers called the『Divine Soldiers』developed by the『White Sacrament』in order to augment his forces as much as possible.

But then again, he doesn't have great expectations in the fighting abilities of

the Necromancers' Servants, Summoners' Familiars and puppet soldiers that he doesn't really understand, all created by hard-headed researchers.

He wouldn't have even come if Gregorius hadn't insisted on it.

「Please, be at ease, Count Bergunt.」(Gregorius)

Illuminated by light magic that emphasizes the dimness of the room, Gregorius speaks to the Count in the gentle tone of a saint addressing his lost sheep.

「The demons' rebellion will soon come to a complete end.」(Gregorius)

「... How can you say that so confidently?」(Bergunt)

「The purpose of the recent rebellions and riots is not the recovery of the capital, but the rescue of Garvinal's orphans – in other words, Daidalos's princes – who were being held here in the fourth research laboratory. Well, that plan has already fallen apart with the failure of the attack that happened just a few days ago.」(Gregorius)

「No, but... The remnant army should have considerable numbers; is it not a little too optimistic to think that they will have been broken after repelling one attack?」(Bergunt)

「No, no, they really have been almost annihilated. The ones who attacked this place were elite soldiers who formed the rebel army's core. A gathering of the Daidalos army's top-ranking officers. Let's see, I would say that there were roughly two thousand of them, perhaps.」(Gregorius)

With two thousand elite soldiers as the main force, as well as the diversionary units running rampant in each region – Bergunt immediately understands, realizing that this matches his predicted numbers for the enemy's hidden forces.

Even if that isn't the case, if all of the former generals leading the rebellion have been killed, the rebellion's organization will certainly collapse. The rebellion will truly become nothing more than disorderly masses.

「Still, I have not heard this information before...?」(Bergunt)

「These are very recent events. And the ones who fought to defend the

research laboratory, the guards, adventurers and, well, the『White Sacrament』 organization itself, have not provided much information on this matter, which is a large part of the reason as to why you have not yet heard about it. In fact, they tell jokes, such as that Judas repelled the attack almost single-handedly, with straight faces! Ahaha! In any case, I think that it will be officially publicized that the enemy was exterminated not long afterwards by the Crusaders' main army, led by Her Excellency Sariel. I suppose the『White Sacrament』has sold the achievement to the Crusaders in order to have their research proceed more smoothly.」(Gregorius)

As Bergunt continues listening, Gregorius explains in a fluent, well-expressed tone that the corpses of almost two thousand Daidalos soldiers will be used as research materials here and that information regarding the rebel army has already been drawn out from the captured leaders, among other things. He no longer has any doubt regarding the rebel army's destruction.

「... I see, I have started to see that there is a chance.」(Bergunt)

The rebellions and rioting in Daidalos will soon die down completely. Bergunt's anxiety about the future vanishes.

However, if the invasion were to begin now, it would barely be in time – no it would already be quite harsh.

Unless the enemy is taken largely by surprise, it is easy for an siege to become a long, drawn-out battle. If one were to look through Sinclair's military history, they would find several cases where sieges continued for years.

If the fort is not captured quickly in the initial attack, there is a risk that it will be prolonged to some extent. If a standoff situation arises, winter will arrive in no time at all, and the soldiers will be trapped in the white prisons known as the blizzards of the Galahad Mountain Range.

「That is not all that I have to say. I have not simply been put in charge of Cardinal Mercedes's precious, precious soldiers as a mere Bishop. It is not worthy of boasting about, but I do have some knowledge regarding battle despite my appearance –」(Gregorius)

「Hmm, if you are saying this much, then I suppose that means that you have seen through my worries?」(Bergunt)

「Yes, indeed. In fact, you see, I have made enough preparations that we can continue a siege even if it snows.」(Gregorius)

Bergunt can almost hear the smile forming on Gregorius's face.

「Are you aware that Daidalos has started wars against the neighboring nation of Spada on multiple occasions?」(Gregorius)

「Well, as much as an average person is. I have heard that the Dragon King called Garvinal or something had an ambition to unite the continent. To rule with military power alone is the epitome of foolishness.」(Bergunt)

「But he was serious. That is why preparations truly are in place to take the nation of Spada.」(Gregorius)

「... It cannot be.」(Bergunt)

「Because of the Dragon King Garvinal's repeated defeats, the human prime minister who was his confidant – ah, this person has already committed suicide – but in any case, Garvinal listened to his proposal and prepared something. That thing was a guaranteed supply chain that is necessary for drawn-out battles.」(Gregorius)

Garvinal was the king of demons that the people of the Sinclair Republic imagined him to be.

Not only was he a member of the powerful and fearsome Dragon race, but the aspect of him that caused him to obsess over『old methods of battle』, such as one-on-one combat between the generals in the deciding battle, was particularly accurate to the people's imagination.

There were all kinds of things to take advantage of. That was why the battles against Spada were lost.

「This included preparations for war during the winter.」(Gregorius)

However, Garvinal apparently ignored his own principles and listened to the admonitions of the prime minister.

If the Crusaders' invasion had come a year later, Daidalos would likely have conducted the first ever modern siege in its history.

「I hypothesized that the reason Daidalos has maintained its highways so

thoroughly for a nation of demons is not only for marching, but to ensure that supplying and transportation would go smoothly. There are also fur coats, gloves and boots – winter equipment for Daidalos’s soldiers. Fire-element magic barriers that emit heat over wide areas were also researched to maintain warmth. Ah, that’s right, there were also white-furred Dortoths to remove snow. Well, I must say, demons do come up with some quite interesting ideas.」
(Gregorius)

Gregorius’s revelation exceeds Bergunt’s expectations. As Bergunt listens, the chances of a successful war being conducted in the winter become greater. Though in the depths of his heart he holds the demons in contempt, from what he has heard, it seems that they were quite thoroughly prepared.

An unexpected fortune – no, this could even possibly be the guidance of the White God. Now that he recalls, the Seventh Apostle Sariel said this to him.

「I also wish for the attack on Spada to begin soon. May the god’s divine protection be with you, Count Bergunt.」(Sariel)

Yes, there is no mistake that this was an omen. It would be nothing more than a cliché phrase if spoken by a mere priest, but when spoken by an Apostle, someone who is closer to the god than humans, it would not be strange for the『god’s divine blessing』to truly be granted.

A short while ago, Bergunt was feeling like he had been driven into a corner, but now he begins to think that the perfect chance has been promised to him.

「Thank you very much for this wonderful information, Bishop-dono. Not only do I see a chance, I can clearly see hope now.」(Bergunt)

「Oh no, hahaha. It is much too early for you to be thanking me, Count Bergunt. The reason I have invited you here is because I wanted to introduce you to a certain something. With that in mind, how about looking over here?」
(Gregorius)

Is there something else? Hearing the Bishop’s incredibly confident tone, Bergunt willingly raises his expectations further.

「Normally, Bishop Judas, who actually developed this, would be boasting about it. But as he is currently absent, allow me to introduce and explain this to

you. Now then, please look –」(Gregorius)

As Gregorius speaks in an exaggerated tone, he claps his hands lightly.

For the sake of secrecy, there is not a single other person in the room, not even a researcher.

But it seems that Gregorius did indeed give a proper signal; there is a click and the sound of whirring machinery echoes.

In the next instant, there is a dull, high-pitched sound, as if a rusty iron door is opening, as one wall of the room begins sliding slowly.

When Bergunt was young, he once ventured into a ruins-type Dungeon as part of his training. Gimmicks where walls move like this are commonly seen in ancient ruins containing ancient magic that is impossible to replicate in the modern era.

A memory of failure, the incident where his party accidentally set off some kind of mechanism and was separated by a moving wall, suddenly flashes through his mind.

However, this memory from the past quickly vanishes from his brain. Beyond the wall that has moved is an unbelievable sight.

「C-could it be... This is...?!」(Bergunt)

There is an enormous, steel person standing there.

A cylindrical body, short legs and moderately long arms. A single large, red Mono-Eye shines in its head. It closely resembles the work Golems that were used for the construction of the Alzas Fort.

However, its size is abnormal. The smaller of the work Golems that Bergunt was accustomed to seeing on-site are two meters in height, and even the largest would barely be five meters tall at most. But the Golem on the other side of the shifted wall is easily taller than ten meters. It is twice – no, possibly three times the size of the work Golems.

Though Bergunt can only make rough estimates, the researchers restlessly walking about its enormous legs are perfect for making comparisons, giving him a clear impression of its overwhelming size.

However, the most surprising thing is that there are numerous such Golems lined up next to each other.

The fact that this room is far above the space where the Golems are lined up, to the point that Bergunt is looking down on them, tells him that this room is around five or six stories tall.

He has a clear view of them and sees that there are four rows of six Golems lined up horizontally, twenty-four in total.

「What do you think? Quite a magnificent view, isn't it, to see the『Ancient Golems』lined up like this. They are large, aren't they? They are cool, aren't they? If you are a man, you must surely feel the romance in large things!」
(Gregorius)

Giving exaggerated nods, Gregorius shamelessly offers his own impressions. However, Bergunt doesn't have the composure to be concerned about that.

His deep-green eyes only see the overwhelmingly enormous metal bodies that are giving off a dark-gray luster.

「These were all excavated here in the Media Ruins. The excavation of half of them is already complete, while the other half was apparently discovered by Bishop Judas in a hidden storage chamber. I am sure that Garvinal also considered using these, but it seemed that this placed a heavy burden on Daidalos's mages. I must say, if there were twenty of these in the battle of Goldran, that battle would have been lost.」(Gregorius)

This is a joke that can be made because victory was already claimed in that battle.

However, it is not the mages of Daidalos who were unable to activate the Golems that should be insulted, but the technological might of the『White Sacrament』, which achieved this in mere months, that should be praised.

The fact that there is light in those Mono-Eyes means that Mana, the source of the Golems' energy, flows through their bodies. It is proof that they are ready to be activated.

「I want you to watch for the two months leading up to their use in real battle, while we experiment with their operations and movements, and prepare pilots.

Right around the beginning of the Month of Gloom, a considerable amount of snow will have piled up, but if we can conduct a siege with this many Golems, I am sure that our chances of victory will be sufficient.」(Gregorius)

「... Is this really alright?」(Bergunt)

It seems that Gregorius is not foolish enough to ask him, “Is what alright?” Quick on the uptake, he gives the response Bergunt wants.

「Bishop Judas has already promised that these Ancient Golems will be offered to aid in the Crusaders’ capturing of Spada. Yes, I have a message from him saying that he would very much like for you to work hard, Count Bergunt.」(Gregorius)

「I see.」(Bergunt)

「Yes. There is the unit of divine soldiers whose final adjustments have been made, as well as an airborne unit made from Daidalos’s flying dragons, and – oh yes, Chimera soldiers made from the two thousand members of the rebel army have also apparently been prepared –」(Gregorius)

「I see, I SEEE! Fufu, fuhahahaha! I have won! With this, I can win – no, with this much military force, no amount of incompetence could cause defeat!」(Bergunt)

Bergunt is laughing loudly with a smile covering his whole face; he is no longer listening to Gregorius’s additional explanations. But even so, the Bishop smiles as if gazing upon an enlightened follower.

「It is fortunate that you are satisfied. Now then, Count Bergunt, we are counting on you for the capture of the Galahad Fort.」(Gregorius)

Note from the author:

With this, Volume 19 is complete.

Bishop Gregorius and Count Bergunt. The scene of conversation between them began in chapter 178,『Demon Hunting.』That chapter was published on 22nd December, 2011... the year before last. I really would like the Count to begin his invasion of Spada as soon as possible...